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OR, THE MAN WITH THE EVIL EYE.

The Romance of a Romp with a
Royal Rogue.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS,
AUTHOR OF "BOSTON BOB," "THE JOCKEY DE-
TECTIVE," THE "DOUBLE CURVE DAN"
STORIES, "THE DRUMMER DETEC-
TIVE," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A NARROW SQUEAK.

THERE was a motley crowd at the wharf at Evansville, Indiana, one bright morning late in April to see the circus boat, *Parole*, pull out for her long voyage down the rivers to the Gulf.

She was a regular flat-bottomed, double-decked side-wheeler, with plenty of room for the baggage and company of the circus, including half-a-dozen animal cages, the contents of which were growling for their breakfast, and render-

"SAM, YOU'VE SAVED MY LIFE," MURMURED THE YOUNG LION-TAMER, GAZING UP INTO THE DAUNTLESS MAN'S FACE.

ing an accompaniment to the mate's swearing that was not any harsher than that gentleman's tones.

The Parole had been engaged for this trip by old man Elliott, the owner of the circus. His full name was Thomas Montgomery Elliott, but he was always spoken of as the "old man" by his associates, and only the tent men and roustabouts ever addressed him as "Mr." The others called him "Tom" to his face, and "the old man" behind his back.

The colored roustabouts had got everything aboard, and were now hauling up the gang-plank to the place where it would be out of the way on the forward deck, and the old man was watching the proceedings from the steps that led to the main deck, where most of the circus people were in their state-rooms, arranging their personal belongings for the trip.

The roustabouts, having triced up the gang-plank, were sent to look after the baggage, and make everything taut, with the mate vociferating a blue streak, after the manner of river mates from time immemorial.

The Parole had reached the middle of the stream, and was being swung around in a clumsy fashion, so that she could head down the river, when the warning bell directed the engineer to back, and the pilot in the wheel-house shoved his helm hard aport, so suddenly that the great boat was head on toward the shore she had just left before the crowd there realized what was going on.

"Easy, thar! Durn yer old picters!" howled the captain, who had pulled the signal bell to run inshore again.

"What's ther trouble, Cap?" demanded the mate, as, hot and flushed, with his broad soft felt hat pulled down over his beetling brows, he pushed a negro out of his way and walked forward from the place on the lower deck where the stowing of the baggage had been going on under his personal direction.

"Why, some durned fool on this hyar boat made us start without one uv ther principal people uv ther show. I should think folks what run sich er business would know that they hed everything aboard afore they let ther boat leave ther shore. Ther Parole ain't no kind uv craft ter be run out an' run in just fer fun. It's bad enough ter strike the channel hyar anyhow, without bevin' ter do it twice over."

The old man replied thus to the mate in a low growl, as he saw the boat swing broadside on to the shore, and watched the movements of his men.

The mate jumped to the side of the boat, and with a few orders, had the great gang-plank pushed out again, and steadied while the passenger they had run in for came carelessly and good-humoredly aboard.

A young girl, with a laughing face, shaded by fair hair that had escaped from its fastenings, and fell down in a wealth of golden beauty from beneath her dainty Paris-made hat. There was a world of defiance in her dark-gray eyes, and she cared no more for the growlings of the captain and mate than she did for the admiration that shone in the eyes of the stalwart brown negro who followed her closely up the plank to the deck.

"Come on, Luke!" she cried to the negro. "Bring that sachel and take it to my state-room. I am tired out, and I want my breakfast."

She spoke as if she were a queen, and so the negro seemed to regard her, for he hurried after her respectfully, getting off the gang-plank just in time to save himself from being flung into the river, for the roustabouts swung it around almost before he had stepped from it, and the boat was again in the channel and heading downstream in the shortest possible space of time.

The girl was skipping lightly up the stairs to the upper deck, bestowing a careless nod upon old Elliott, who had been watching her, and not regarding the captain any more than if he had been his most insignificant roustabout, when a hand grasped her wrist, and she was stopped short.

A cry of fear, that was almost strangled in her throat, came from her lips, and her face turned deadly pale.

"Leonard!"

A young man, with a handsome, swarthy face, black eyes and thin cruel mouth, only partly hidden by a sweeping black mustache, was looking at her with a curious expression, in which love and hate were intermingled. He held her wrist with a thin, powerful right hand that was much whiter than his face, while with his left he raised a broad Panama hat from his head, clustering black curls in mock respect.

"You thought you would get away from me by accepting this engagement with Elliott, didn't you?" he hissed, in a low tone.

"And what if I did?"

There was an attempt at defiance in the manner of the girl that was pitiful. It was too evident that she was in deadly fear of this dark, handsome young man.

"Nothing, Belle. Only I have signed with him, too, and I shall be at your elbow at all times. I am going to do my lion-taming act,

and I shall ride in the ring sometimes, when the old man thinks the circus needs strengthening. That's all. You know me. You have promised to be my wife, and you shall keep your word—or—"

He paused and the girl looked inquiringly into his face as she repeated, in a terrified whisper: "Or—"

"You will die!"

He flung her from him, and turned away to go below, as she continued on her way to her state-room, where the negro, Luke, had already deposited her sachel, and was waiting at the door for further orders.

She did not speak to him. Only went into the little room and shut the door in his face with a bang.

"Fo' de Lawd, she'ser honey," muttered Luke, as he went forward, and was commanded by the old man to go below and see that the animal cages were all right.

He found Leonard in the cage in which the largest of the two lions was confined, pulling at the huge animal's mane and patting his head alternately, while he talked to him as he would to a dog.

"Monarch, old fellow, you'll have some interesting times with me before we get through with this trip, I can see. You have been too quiet all winter, and it is going to be a test of strength before long, so sure as my name is Leonard Merville."

He looked out of the cage and saw Luke.

"Luke!"

"Yes, Mas'r Leonard."

"Bring me a piece of that meat from the barrel behind you."

The negro opened his eyes rather wider than usual, as he stammered:

"But—Mas'r Leonard! yo' ain't gwine ter let 'um see dat meat while you is in the cage, are yo'?"

The young man turned fiercely upon him, and but that he was in the cage, and the negro outside, Luke would have received a cut with the heavy blacksnake in Leonard's hand as sure as that he was living.

"Do as I tell you. When I want a nigger's advice I always ask for it."

Luke did not venture to argue the point any longer. He went to the barrel, and with a huge double-pronged pitchfork, brought out a mass of raw meat and carried it to the cage.

"Shove it through the bars."

"It won't go through. It's too big."

The young man unfastened the gate of the cage, and opened it wide enough for the meat to be pushed through. Then, as the lion with a growl, moved toward the meat, he gave the animal a kick as he fastened the gate, and stood between the lion and his prospective breakfast.

"Now, Monarch, I'm going to give you a lesson," observed the young man, as he grasped his blacksnake firmly in his right hand and kicked the meat toward the lion.

Monarch sprung toward the meat, and at the same instant Leonard interposed himself and bestowed a savage cut upon the lion's shoulder.

The lion shrunk back, with a cry of mingled rage and pain.

"That's one chapter of the story I'm going to tell you," remarked Leonard, coolly. "You are laboring under the impression that you can run this thing to suit yourself, and I'm going to show you that you are mistaken."

He picked up the meat in his left hand and held it near the lion's nose. Monarch caught at the meat, and this time seized it with his teeth.

"Let go, you brute," cried the young man, as he switched the lion across the nose with his whip and pulled the meat away again.

Monarch turned around and walked slowly to the other end of his cage. His tail swung to and fro and there was a low growling from his throat that told how his savage nature was being stirred up by the tantalizing actions of the young man with the whip.

"Gettng mad now, ain't you?" muttered Leonard. "Well, that is what I want."

He held the meat in his left hand and advanced toward the corner in which the mighty beast was sulking.

"Mas'r Leonard, fo' de good Lawd's sake don't do it! He done git so mad he jumpat you shuah," wailed Luke, in an agony of terror.

"Shut your mouth, you black fool!" was Leonard Merville's ungracious response. "Do you suppose I don't know my business?"

"Mebbe yo' do," muttered the negro, below his breath. "Mebbe yo' do. But I never done see no lion look like that without thar bein' trubble for some one."

He was watching every movement of the lion, and he saw that his tail was gradually straightening out and that there was a backward furtive glance in his glowing eyeballs like that of a bulldog just before he springs.

Leonard Merville seemed to realize that a critical moment was approaching in his struggle for the mastery with the lion.

He grasped his blacksnake more securely, and kept his black eyes fastened on the eyes of the lion, never wavering in the least. He knew that the next few moments would decide which was to be master.

"Now, Monarch, we'll try!" he said, softly, as

he slowly approached and held the meat toward the fangs that showed themselves between the snarling lips of the king of beasts.

Step by step he stole nearer, and the lion half turned, so that he could watch the young man over his shoulder, while the great tail, with its tuft at the end, swung slowly from side to side and almost straight out.

At last the young man was so near that he could touch Monarch's heaving flanks. He thrust out the meat, and then, before he could use his whip, as he had intended, there was a mighty roar, and Leonard Merville was prostrate, with one great paw on his chest, while the sound of the tearing meat told that the great jaws of the lion were at work on the meal that had been withheld from him so long.

Leonard could hardly breathe under the weight of the lion's paw. His whip had flown from his hand to the other end of the cage, and he was utterly helpless.

Luke had rushed away simultaneously with the attack of the lion upon the young man, and it looked as if Leonard Merville's last hour had come.

Monarch champed and tore at the meat, emitting growls and roars continuously, and occasionally turning the glance of his bloodshot eye upon Leonard's countenance, that was an awful gray, instead of the red-brown that belonged to it naturally.

"As soon as he has finished that meat, he will begin on me," thought Leonard, and somehow the idea did not seem so terrible as one would have thought. The lion had given him a shake when he made his attack, and his victim was lulled into a half-drowsy state of resignation that he could not have explained, but that took away much of the horror of his situation.

He lay calmly watching Monarch tearing at his meat, and beyond wishing that the paw did not weigh so heavily upon his chest, was comparatively unconcerned.

Suddenly he was awakened from the lethargy that was creeping over him by the sound of a cheery voice near the cage, and a rattling of the bars as the gate was opened.

Then there was a crash as an iron bar descended on the head of the lion, and a fearful roar as the bar was used spear-fashion and driven into the animal's neck, and Monarch leaped back into his corner growling in rage, that was partly mixed with terror.

"Sam, you've saved my life," murmured the young lion-tamer, gazing up into the dauntless man's face.

"Yes, looks like it, don't it?" was the half-comical answer. "But, we must out of this," and, seizing Leonard's hand he lifted him to his feet, pushed open the door behind him, and, shoving the tamer out, backed out himself and closed the door with a clang.

"That was a close call, Leonard, fer a fact," and the round face broke into a smile, when, seeing the frightened face of Luke in the crowd now pressing around, the rescuer gave vent to a hearty laugh.

CHAPTER II.

LIFE FOR LIFE.

THE owner of the cheery voice and loud laugh was a rather short, stout young man, with a round face, ornamented with a blonde mustache and a pair of dancing blue eyes. He was dressed in a short, round coat of the sack shape, and on his head he wore a Panama hat.

He had removed the hat to fan himself as he stood there in the crowd, and revealed the fact that his head was perfectly bald save for a fringe of light hair that just reached the place where his hat came when he wore it. His head shone in the morning sun, and this, with his handsome, laughing face, made him as pleasant an object as morning sun ever shone upon.

"Sam Wilson, you're worthy of your name," said Leonard, shaking the other's hand with fervent vigor.

"What—the name of Sam Wilson, eh? Well, I hope so. I've tried to keep it honest. It was my father's name, and he handed it down to me without a stain upon it. So it was my duty to try and keep it clean," laughed Sam.

"You know that is not what I meant. The boys call you 'Fearless Sam,' and you deserve the name."

"Thanks!" responded Sam, with a deep bow, as he took off his hat to make it more impressive. "If I were you, I wouldn't take chances with that or'ny lion any more. Look at him now."

He pointed to Monarch as he spoke, and Leonard uttered a cry of rage as he sprung to the door of the cage, and began to fumble at the bar that secured it.

Sam Wilson placed his hand on the other's shoulder, but Leonard's blood was up, and he was determined to go into the cage.

"All right, my boy, in course; ef you are determined to take chances, it will have to go. But I wouldn't do it, if I were you."

Sam was speaking quietly, but was watching the movements of his impetuous companion very closely, notwithstanding.

Leonard tore open the door of the cage, and then, with a yell of rage, sprung upon Monarch, whip in hand.

"Come out of that corner, you brute!" he hissed.

The lion may not have understood the words, but he knew what the tone meant, and he cowered in a corner of the cage like a beaten cur.

Once, twice, thrice, the supple whip came down on the animal's ribs, the only response to the blows being a low snarl of mingled fear and anger. A chance might turn the scale one way or the other, making the lion the slave of the man, or a wild beast that nothing could tame.

Leonard's eyes flashed as he rained the blows on the lion.

"He's getting mad!" observed Sam Wilson, as he leaned carelessly against the bars of the cage, outside, and watched the struggle within.

Leonard Merville did not answer, but he kept his eye on that of the lion and hit him harder.

In a flash the crisis came.

Monarch made a spring at his tormentor, and but for Leonard's agile movements the tale would have been told fatally for the man.

But, Leonard was not to be caught twice in the same way. He ducked and the lion passed over him, crashing against the other end of the den with a force that made everything shake, and threatened to break out the strong wood, braced in all directions with iron.

The lion seemed to realize now that he must either fight or give in, and he was anything but conquered yet.

Hardly had he reached his feet when he turned, quick as a cat, and was at Leonard again, with a tremendous spring, that the young man avoided with equal skill.

Three times was this terrible game tried, and each time the young man gave the beast a fierce cut as he avoided his onslaught.

After the third unsuccessful leap the lion crouched in his corner, with his face to his foe and his tail swaying in that ominous manner that Leonard knew so well meant mischief.

"I guess we will end this," he muttered.

He stepped forward to the side of Monarch, and attacked him with the whip so rapidly, and with so much force, that the animal seemed to be dazed.

Gradually the lion crouched lower and lower under the rapid blows, until he was lying flat on his stomach, while the young man never stopped his use of the whip.

At last the lion crawled out, flat, and with a world of meekness expressed in his great eyes, rubbed his mane against his master.

Then Leonard Merville ceased thrashing him.

"Well, Sam, what do you think of him now?"

"I guess you have got the best of him," was Sam Wilson's careless response.

A light step behind him made him turn, and he removed his hat as he saw that it was Belle Howard.

"Wal, Miss Belle, you got aboard all right, eh?"

"Yes."

Belle was watching Leonard Merville as if fascinated by him.

He did not speak to her, but giving the prostrate brute a kick, to warn him not to try any more tricks, he reached to the outside of the door of the cage, and let himself out.

Then he approached Belle, and suddenly grasping her wrist, whispered:

"Come with me."

The girl might have refused to go, but the hold on her wrist was so powerful that it would have been idle for her to resist.

Leonard led her away, among the baggage of the circus—the tent-poles, canvas, trunks and animal-cages, to the middle of the deck, where there was a vacant space in which the roustabouts and circus laborers were accustomed to lounge when their services were not in active demand.

Sam Wilson had not appeared to notice particularly, but he had seen the way in which Leonard took the girl's wrist, and he did not like it.

"Now, what in thunderation does that mean?" he muttered. "He grabbed her as if she hadn't any feeling in that little white wrist of hers. Sam, you may find more to do on this hyar boat than you thought. Wal, it's all in my line."

He strolled carelessly toward the spot where Leonard was now talking earnestly to the girl, but did not go near enough to hear what the young man was saying.

"Wal, ef thar ain't thet or'nary nigger goin' up thar, too! Wal, thar's something in thar wind, an' I'm goin' ter find out what it is."

True enough, Luke had run swiftly around the baggage opposite to Leonard, so that he had reached the spot without being seen by the girl. Perhaps Leonard could not see him, either, but Sam Wilson was not so sure of that.

"Thar's something between thet nigger and Leonard Merville, and whatever it is does not mean any good for that gal. I know it."

He threw himself down on a pile of canvas and lay at his ease, where he could watch every movement of the three, without being seen.

The interview between the girl and Leonard did not last long. There were a few angry gestures from the young man, and a scornful toss of the head on the part of the girl; then she turned and walked rapidly away, in the direction of the imperturbable Sam.

She had not gone more than half a dozen steps, when Luke, who had been watching Leonard, sprung forward and grasped the wrist of the girl.

Hardly had he done so when a young man, with fair curly hair and a pink-and-white complexion, jumped out from somewhere, and planted his fist squarely in the negro's mouth.

"Take that, you black scoundrel!" he cried; but no sooner were the words out of his mouth than Leonard Merville, who had given the sign to Luke upon which he had caught the girl, shot out his own fist and catching the fair-haired young man full in the chest, sent him down in a heap on top of Luke. Leonard hardly noticed the effect of his blow, for he wanted to catch the girl, who had hastened away as soon as Luke had been compelled to release her.

He caught the girl by her long flowing hair, that had escaped from its fastenings and hung in a long braid down her back, and dragged her back with so much force that she almost fell.

Not quite, however, for Sam Wilson interposed by throwing his arm around the young man's neck, and twisting him off his feet in a very neat, workmanlike manner.

"Hold on, Leonard! This thing has gone far enough," observed Sam, coolly. "After this, Belle Howard is under my protection."

Leonard was livid with rage.

He drew back, and his hand flew to his hip pocket.

Ere he could withdraw it he was looking down the muzzle of a 44-caliber six-shooter.

"Don't try thet, Leonard. It won't pay you. And I tell you I do shoot 'most mighty quick when I hez ter. See?"

The young man folded his arms and looked at the good-humored Sam with a curious expression.

"Sam!"

"Wal?"

"You saved my life!"

"When?"

"Just now. You know all about it. If it hadn't been for you, I should have made a meal for that lion over there before now."

"Wal, is thet any reason why you should persecute a poor gal, who is on this boat to earn her living, and who hasn't any one to take care of her?" asked Sam, with a little more energy than he usually displayed.

"Hold on, there," interrupted the fair-haired young man, who had arisen from the floor where he had been buried by Leonard's fist. "You are mistaken. Belle Howard has some one to take care of her, and his name is Dale Graham."

Leonard Merville favored his rival with a gleam of deadly hatred, but did not answer him. Turning to Sam Wilson, he said, again:

"You saved my life."

"Wal? What of it?"

"I owe you a life."

"Um!"

"And I always pay my debts."

"Good habit. Wish all the people that owe me money had the same."

"Now, Sam Wilson, I'm going to do you up before this trip is over. Remember that."

"It is very good of you. I will try and keep it in mind."

He waved his revolver gently in his hand as he spoke, with a significant smile, as Leonard went on:

"The first time I have you in my power—"

He paused.

"Wal?" asked Sam.

"I shall pay my debt."

"Oh, I see."

A light broke in upon Sam, and he laughed softly and with extreme enjoyment.

"Only once will I let you off. After that, your life is mine, whenever I can take it."

"Whenever you can take it!" repeated Sam, quietly.

He turned away with a mocking smile, and offered his arm to Belle.

As she took it, Sam's revolver was wrenched out of his hand, and he tripped backward over some obstruction, and lay at full length on his back. Then he felt a knee upon his chest, and the muzzle of his revolver was pressed so hard against his forehead that it made a deep ring in the flesh.

Sam's first impulse was to try and release himself, but Leonard Merville's muscles were like steel-springs and he held his enemy so firmly that Sam realized at once that he was powerless.

Dale Graham rushed to the rescue, but Luke, who was partially behind him, struck him behind the ear with such force that he fell senseless.

"Now, Sam Wilson, I am going to pay my debt," hissed Leonard in his ear. "You understand?"

"Certainly; I understand."

Leonard Merville arose and banded the revolver back to Wilson, who took it without a word and returned it to his pocket.

"Sam Wilson, I've given you your life for mine. Look out for me. I shall kill you whenever I think it worth my while, or whenever I think I have reason, because I do not owe you anyting now."

With a scowl, that took in the girl, the pros-

trate Dale and Sam himself, Leonard Merville walked swiftly away, closely followed by the negro, Luke.

Sam Wilson stooped to examine the young man lying at his feet, and as he found that he was recovering from the effects of the blow of Luke's fist, helped him to his feet, remarking, in his self-possessed way:

"There will be fun for me on this boat, I can see. That young man is decidedly bloodthirsty."

CHAPTER III, TWO PISTOL-SHOTS.

THE Parole went rapidly down the river, and by the middle of the day everything on board had pretty well assumed a shipshape appearance.

The circus people had been taking their ease in their cabins or lounging about the decks, and there was no sign of the trouble that was brewing for some one, judging by the episode in which Sam Wilson and Leonard Merville had taken part.

Sam was leaning against the heavy post that supported the upper deck, near the bow of the boat, looking over some papers in his pocket-book.

"Ah!" he muttered. "Here it is. But how am I to find out what I want to know? My information reads that the man who burglarized the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg is supposed to be on board the Parole. I am not told whether he is young or old, whether he is a sailor or a circus performer, a grafted or a gentleman of leisure. All I am told is that he is on this boat. I am not even informed why the man is supposed to be here. A hard case! A hard case! But then, I could not expect anything more from an anonymous letter. It may not even be the truth."

Sam Wilson took off his Panama hat and polished his glowing dome of thought with a silk handkerchief till it shone like an opal jar. Then he resumed his cogitations.

"Fifty thousand dollars! All in good United States greenbacks. Numbers not known and not the slightest clew to the bills themselves. Wal, wal! They call me a pretty slick detective, but if I am to trace this fellow down, I think I shall deserve a gold medal. Why durn my picture! It may be the captain of the boat, or old Tom Elliott himself, for anything I know."

"Sam!"
A squeaky voice at his elbow made him start, but he did not turn around. He evidently recognized the squeaky voice without moving his head around, although his eyes involuntarily turned keenly in the direction of the voice, but without seeing anything.

"Wal," he whispered.

"Nothing yet?"

"No."

"Suspect?"

"Not as yet. But I may before long."

"All right. I'm here."

"Don't let any one see you talking to me."

"I'm fly."

"I know that, Shad, or you couldn't be working for me."

As Sam Wilson spoke he sidled carelessly away from the post against which he had been leaning and looked at it.

Although he had been talking to some one who must have been very near the post—for the conversation was conducted in wheezy whispers—not a sign of human being was to be seen.

Sam chuckled quietly, as he said, in a low voice:

"Come out of thet, Shadow, an' let me see yer."

Then a funny thing happened.

The post against which Sam had been leaning was a stout piece of timber, about as thick as the average telegraph pole, but square, instead of round. There was nothing else near it, and it seemed impossible that the individual with whom Sam had been talking could be concealed anywhere in the neighborhood.

But the post seemed to become suddenly endowed with life, for out of it, as it appeared, a man came, and stood grinning in the sunlight.

"Well, Fearless. Here I am."

The squeaky voice belonged to the man, and was very thin. But, thin as it was, it fitted the owner. He had actually been hiding behind the post, which had been large enough to conceal him completely. He had an intelligent face, but it was very peaked, and its long, thin shape was emphasized by a goatee, waxed and brought to a point. The arms of the man were not thicker than broom handles, and his legs were like baseball bats. His long, thin fingers were spread out as he leaned against the post, and one could almost hear his bones rattle whenever he moved.

Such was Tim, or "Shadow" Koffey, the "Skeleton Dude."

"Shad, if you ever get fat, you will lose your most useful peculiarity."

Shad trembled, and there was a look of genuine consternation in his face, as he said:

"Say, Fearless, don't talk like that. You'll give me an attack of heart disease. Get fat! Why, what should I do if I was to get fat? How could I make a living? No, indeed! I thank kind fortune for making me so that I am always sure of a living salary from a show, even if I

didn't work for the 'Grand Combination Detective.' I know my advantages, and I would rather die than lose them."

The detective laughed.

"I don't think you will ever lose them, Shad. You always have been thin, and I guess you always will be."

"I hope so," responded Shad, fervently.

"Shad!"

"Well?"

"Keep your eye on that English concertina-player."

"Oho!" whistled the Skeleton Dude, as he pulled at his waxed goatee and winked knowingly at the detective.

"Thet's all, Shad. You'd better get away from me now. It won't do any good fer people ter suspect ez you are working with me, don't yer see?"

Shadow nodded and turned away and—ran plump into a man with a red face, red mutton-chop whiskers, and wearing a red-brown suit of clothes of heavy woolen material.

"Blawst the bloomin' idiot. Where are you a-goin' to? Cawn't you see a cove?" burst from the red-whiskered man.

Shad grinned, as he replied:

"I saw you, but it seems as if you didn't see me. Guess I was standing sideways."

"Ha, ha! Well, you are a funny bloke! It's a wonder I didn't cut meself bloomin' well in two against you. You ought not to go about without a fence or a sign-board on you, so that fellers could toll where you was."

Shad slipped behind him, and with a deft movement he felt in all his pockets before the Englishman knew that he had been touched.

"Why, where are you?" he exclaimed, as he turned around, looking for the skeleton.

Shad dexterously kept out of his sight, and at last sped swiftly up the staircase, keeping close to the wall, so that he was out of sight before the red-whiskered man could bring his vision to bear on the stairs at all.

"Well, if he ain't the bloomin'est cove as I ever see, may I never see Charing Cross again!" exclaimed the mystified Englishman. "I'm blowed if that ain't unprofessional. But then, you never know what blokes will do in this here blawsted country."

With this sage reflection, the gentleman dismissed the subject from his mind, and drew from one of his pockets a handbill, on which, in large type, were the words, "Professor Handel Montgomery, the World's Greatest Concertina and Harmonic Player."

"There, Mr. Wilson, what do you think of that for a bloomin' ad? Ain't that rich? I'm goin' to have that in all the papers where we advertise the show. I'm the bloke as will draw the people. I was worth ten pounds a week in dear old Lunnon, and I'd have got it, too, if it wasn't for a feller as was jealous of me, and kept me out of it. Never mind. I'll show them what music is in America. They have been waiting for me here for a hundred years."

"Who have been waiting—the police?" put in the detective, quietly, with a smile."

"What d'ye mean? You don't want to insult me, I hope, eh?" demanded the other, as his whiskers seemed to take on a deeper shade of red in his indignation.

"No, no. Certainly not," replied the detective, quickly. "It was only a joke."

"Coves shouldn't make such jokes. They ain't nice to the coves what the jokes is made on."

"I don't know about this fellow. Either he is square, or else he is very artful. We shall see. He is the only person on the boat that I don't know something about, and I may as well keep my eye on him. Some of these English crooks are almighty slick. An' all this hyar innocence may be put on. I'll watch him."

"What say?" asked the red-whiskered man.

"Nothing."

"Oh, I thought you spoke."

"No."

He took the handbill the other offered him, and with a promise that he would see it put in all the papers on their route, walked aft to where the animals were being fed by Luke, the negro.

The detective was in deep thought. He had taken the position on the Parole as advertising agent for the show, but his main purpose was to hunt down the robbers of the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg, and, if possible, to recover the money stolen.

He had had plenty of experience as a showman, so that he was at home in the business, and he calculated to enjoy a trip down the river, and do some work at the same time.

So far he was completely in the dark. He had received the anonymous letter after the officials of the bank had placed the case in his hands, and he had come on the Parole because he believed that there was something in the statement in the letter, although he could not tell how much was true, and how much false.

"Seems ter me I hev enough ter keep me from goin' ter sleep 'cept in regular sleepin' hours," he muttered. "What with tryin' ter find out who took ther money, an' keepin' my eye on my dear young friend, Leonard, I may call myself a busy man."

He strolled over to the cage and stood by the side of Luke as he pushed pieces of raw meat to the animals.

Luke did not speak, but he favored him with a look of as much defiance as he dared to throw into his expression, without drawing upon him the immediate vengeance of the detective.

Sam watched the lions at their meals, and did not appear to notice the negro.

"Fearless!"

A squeaky voice in his ear. He did not turn, but there was the slightest toss of his head to show the skeleton Dude that he heard him.

"Keep your eyes peeled!" added the squeaky voice.

Another toss of the detective's head seemed to say:

"Why?"

"Leonard Merville."

"Ah!"

The detective uttered this exclamation under his breath, and carelessly turned his head.

He saw that Shad was squeezed into a narrow space between two immense trunks that would not have allowed even a small boy to hide himself, while, leaning on one of the trunks, regarding him with a baleful eye, was Leonard Merville.

The eyes of the detective and Leonard met, and then the young man, quick as a flash, drew a revolver and pointing it at the detective's head, fired.

There was a loud report, that sounded all the louder on account of the shot being fired in such a confined space, but the detective was unhurt. Just as Leonard pulled the trigger, the skeleton dude, who had been entirely unobserved by the young man, reached out of his hiding-place, and threw up the hand that held the pistol.

There was a curse from the lips of Merville, simultaneously with the shot, as he saw that he had missed his intended victim, but neither the shot nor the curse were to be compared in piercing sound with a shriek that broke forth from behind a pile of trunks near the cages.

The next instant Professor Handel Montgomery rushed out with his hand to his forehead, and with a groan, fell to the floor.

Fearless Sam, disregarding the possibility of Leonard Merville shooting at him again, knelt by the side of the groaning concertina-player, and sought for the wound.

"Where is it?"

"Oh, in my head," moaned the sufferer.

The detective carefully removed the traveling cap, of the same reddish-brown woolen material as the suit of clothes, and looked at the head of the Englishman.

"I can't find it," he said, quietly.

Handel Montgomery slowly moved himself from side to side, as if to find out whether he could move at all, and then, as he took the cap out of the detective's hand, looked at it, and grumbled:

"Well, I'm blowed! If the bloomin' juggins didn't shoot the button off the top of my cap."

The detective burst into a fit of laughter, and then something made his revolver leap out of his pocket, and another pistol shot rung through the boat.

CHAPTER IV.

TWO PAIRS OF EYES.

It was in the full glow of a beautiful Southern evening that the Parole ran into a small town to give the first show of the season.

There was so much unpacking to do for the opening of the campaign that the boat had drawn in earlier than was the custom. The people would take a number of hours to get everything ready.

Fearless Sam, accompanied by Shad and Montgomery, and two colored roustabouts, went into the town with bundles of paper and paste and brushes, and by midnight had every blank wall covered with glaring announcements of the performance of "Elliott's Aggregation of Wonders," that was to exhibit on the next day.

In the mean time, the preparations for the performance were going on briskly on an open space not far from the river, which old Elliott had, with a professional eye, selected as soon as he had landed.

The boss canvasman, with his staff of assistants, with lay-out pins, were raising the tents, and there was a small canvas city in the big open space by the time the bill-posting in the town had been finished.

It was dark as pitch when Fearless Sam, Shad and Montgomery returned, and making their way to the animal tent, prepared to spend the rest of the night on the piles of hay that had been got ready to feed the horses in the morning.

Sam chose a place immediately beneath the den in which the big lion, Monarch, was walking up and down, restlessly, occasionally uttering a low growl.

"I am glad I didn't perforate that young feller to-day," muttered the detective. "I should like to get through this hyar trap without killing him. But, if he plays many more tricks on me, I'm afraid that will be a funeral. I could just as easily have put a bullet through his head as over it to-day, although it seems ter me that Leonard can not understand that. Wal, wal;

it's er great pity ez young fellers hev so little sense."

With this philosophical reflection Fearless Sam kicked off his shoes, and lay down on the hay with a sigh of satisfaction. He had a long, exciting day, and he was tired.

He had just closed his eyes when he felt a hand on his face, feeling about in the dark.

In a flash he was on his feet, with his hand on some one's throat and his revolver pressed against the intruder's forehead.

"For' de Lawd, Mass'r Sam, don't shoot," muttered a trembling voice.

The detective's answer was to tighten his grasp on the throat he held, and to hold the revolver more firmly against the forehead.

"You black scoundrel! What are you doin' hyar? D'yer think you kin catch Sam Wilson by any sich trick ez that?" demanded the detective, sternly.

"I wuz lookin' fer some hay, 'deed I wuz," stammered the negro.

"I don't believe you," returned Sam, as he released Luke and put his pistol back into his pocket. "But it does not matter. Git!"

"Yes, Mas'r Sam," and Luke was gone.

"Pretty state of things," thought the detective. "Ef I'm ter hev thet nigger chasin' me, and Leonard Merville alw'y's tryin' ter git ther drop, I won't hev any chance ter rest."

He was satisfied that he would not be disturbed again for awhile evidently, for he lay down on his hay, and in five minutes his regular breathing was mingling with the low growls of the lion over him, and announcing that he was fast asleep.

A little distance from Sam another scene was in progress, that would have interested the detective had he been able to see the proceedings.

Handel Montgomery was sitting on a pile of hay in front of a monkeys' cage examining something by the dim light of a lantern that hung above him.

The something was a fat pocketbook.

"I'll just take a look at my bloomin' money. When a cove has a little he ought to make sure that it is all right. I had trouble enough to get it, and I'm blowed if I want to let go of it now."

He took out a roll of bills, and turned them over in his hands lovingly. The light of the lantern fell full upon his hands and their precious contents, leaving everything else in deep shadow.

"Ah! All in big bills! I was lucky to get this. I suppose if anybody knew I had so much I should be murdered. Well, they sha'n't know it. Every one is asleep around here now, and if any one was awake he couldn't see me over here in the dark. Crickey! I'm glad I have this money."

He spoke in a low, muttering tone, that conveyed intense enjoyment, while, at the same time, his furtive glances on all sides indicated that he was on the watch against eavesdroppers.

"Fifty thousand dollars!" he said, in a slightly louder tone, carried away by his satisfaction for an instant. Then he carefully counted the money in his pocketbook, and put it back in his pocket.

"There is only enough there to make me safe in case I wanted a good sum of money suddenly," he muttered. "But in that trunk of mine, where no one suspects, I have the rest. I wonder—"

He stopped and looked around him cautiously.

"It's so dark in the night in this here blawsted country that a cove cawn't see anything. But I don't think any of those fellers are awake. I'm just going to see into my trunk and make sure that it is all right."

He arose from his bed of hay and stole into the dressing-tent, that was not far from where he had been lying. A big mastiff came toward him with a growl as he lifted the flap of the entrance to the tent, but a word was enough to quiet the dog, who licked his hand affectionately, and, with a low whine of contentment, stretched himself again before the entrance to the tent.

It was very dark, but Montgomery had been in the dark for so long that his eyes were used to it, and he made his way without difficulty to a certain part of the tent, where a trunk of unmistakable English make, iron-clamped and studded with great iron nail-heads, stood among a number of others.

Kneeling on the sawdust-covered ground, the concertina-player opened the trunk, and then, pushing his hand down among the clothes in the receptacle, poked about until he heard a slight click. Then he withdrew his hand, and a large open space at the bottom of the trunk was revealed, the clothes all falling to one end, as if in obedience to some power that was not apparent.

"Aha! I can feel the little darlings. Blow me tight if it would not kill me if I was to lose any of 'em now," he observed, between his teeth. "But I wouldn't trust these circus people, anyhow."

He took a match from his pocket, and lighted a small bull's-eye lantern that formed a part of the contents of the trunk. With this he flashed a light all around the room.

"Don't see nothing in the bloomin' place but

myself. I guess I'm safe enough. The dog wouldn't let the strangers come in, and I saw Sam Wilson, Shad and the niggers go to sleep some time ago. The coves over here may think that they can get the best of the gentlemen from the other side of the Atlantic, but we know how to take care of ourselves."

He chuckled in a self-satisfied manner, and turning his lantern so that the light fell full upon the bottom of the trunk, showed that there were a number of bundles of greenbacks, neatly tied up and labeled with the amounts, just as they are seen in banks.

He took up one of the bundles, and removing the rubber bands from it, proceeded to count the bills.

He became completely absorbed in his occupation, and a loud noise might have been made in his vicinity without his being disturbed.

This may account for the fact that he was quite unaware that two pair of eyes were watching him closely, and that every movement he made was carefully noted.

"Ah, me bloomin' coves!" he exclaimed, after a time, as he fastened up the package and deposited it carefully in one corner of the secret compartment of his trunk. "There's one hundred hundred-dollar bills in this package. Good. And there's four more packages of the same sort. I don't know about counting them all. It would take too long. And yet I feel as if I cawn't leave them without going all over them."

He remained leaning in front of the trunk, taking the packages in his hand, one by one, and apparently gloating over his treasure, but without taking the trouble to count the bills.

"I shall take this one trip, because I want to see all I can of this blawsted country, and this is a good chance to do it. But it bothers me to have all this money with me, and yet I daren't leave it anywhere."

He shut down the secret compartment in his trunk, but immediately opened it again.

"Somehow, I like to look at you," he muttered. "You are so pretty, and then you came to me so easy. One day I was poor, and then, after one night, I had fifty thousand dollars."

The two pairs of eyes seemed as if they would pierce him through and through, and now one pair was so near that their owner could have put his arms around Montgomery's neck had he wanted to do so.

The other eyes were outside the tent, but were looking through a small hole, from which they could see everything that took place, but were too far away for their owner to hear Handel Montgomery's soliloquy.

"Well, I'll shut up shop and go to bed. Everything is safe."

He extinguished the light of the lantern and closed and locked the trunk. Then he walked to the door of the tent, caressing the big mastiff as he passed him, and strolled leisurely over to his bed on the pile of hay, in a perfectly contented frame of mind.

No sooner had he disappeared than the man in the tent glided over to the trunk, and bending over it, struck a match, that he might see the keyhole.

The light of the match revealed the thin, peaked face, with the long waxed goatee of Tim Koffey, the Skeleton Dude, otherwise the "Shadow."

"I wonder how he opens this trunk. If I could only find the way to do it, I would just take the money out and give it to the governor. That would please him, I know. Fearless likes to see people do things boldly, he always says."

Shad was examining the lock of the trunk while thus cogitating, and had now taken from his pocket a pen-knife, and was poking at the lock.

"No use! I wasn't made for a burglar. I haven't the first notion of how to pick a lock, and if I had, maybe I couldn't open the inside place where he has the bills."

He stood for a moment ruminating, and had just made up his mind that he would go and tell Sam Wilson what he had seen, when he found himself lifted in a pair of strong hands, carried out of the tent and thrown far into the darkness.

CHAPTER V.

THE COMPACT.

"WELL, shiver my bones! Run me through a gaspipe!"

Shad sputtered these extraordinary oaths with the utmost solemnity, as he rolled over in the mud and sawdust, and brought up against the wheels of a traveling monkey cage with a bump that made every one of his bones ache.

"Hallo! What are you doin', blawst yer? Do you want to make a cove keep awake all night?" growled a thick voice from beneath the monkey cage, that Shad recognized as that of the red-whiskered concertina-player.

He could not see the skeleton dude, and it was not Shad's purpose to take Handel Montgomery into his confidence at that moment.

The dude arose to his feet as soon as he had stopped, and, without answering Montgomery, ran back toward the tent. He was just lifting the flap, when old Elliott and Leonard Merville appeared in the opening, while the black face of Luke looked over their shoulders, in the light of a bright lantern carried by old Elliott.

"What are yer doin' here, Shad?" demanded

Elliott. "Time decent people was in bed. We have ter be up early in the morning, and I should think you need all the sleep that can be got now."

"I am not doing anything, Mr. Elliott," returned Shad, in a dignified way. "And I am going to bed. But I should like to know who took the liberty of throwing me across the lot. I am not doing an acrobatic turn just now, and I object to such rough treatment."

"Oh, git out, Shad. You're dreaming," was Old Elliott's good-humored reply.

"Am I? Well, then, I'm having a very bad nightmare, and I must have tumbled out of bed, from the way my bones ache."

Thus saying, Shad retired in a very stiff and dignified manner, leaving Leonard and Elliott to go back to their couches or sit up all night, just as they pleased.

"I don't know why that nigger, Luke, was grinning at me like that," muttered Shad. "If I thought he meant to insult me, I'd tan his black hide so that he would be sore for a month. I know I shall have to lick him some time. He called me 'old fifty-pounder' the other day. He may find that fifty-pounds of good bone is better than one hundred and eighty pounds of nigger, after all."

The pursuit of his cogitations brought him to the lion's cage, under which still slumbered Fearless Sam, as peacefully as if there were no enemies in the world, or as if he were in a castle, with a strong body-guard around him.

At the first word of Shad to Sam, the detective was sitting up, revolver in hand.

"All right, Fearless!"

"Oh, it is you, is it, Shad?"

"Yes."

"Wal?"

"I've found the money."

"What money?"

"The money you are looking for—the fifty thousand dollars."

"The deuce yer hev!" exclaimed Sam, becoming more interested. "Whar is it?"

"In one of the tents—in a trunk."

"Whose trunk?"

Shad leaned forward and whispered in his ear. The detective nodded, approvingly.

"Ha! That's what I half suspected."

A dark form, that was not noticed by either the Skeleton Dude or the detective, that was lurking at the side of the lion's cage, shook its fist in impotent wrath at Shad as he whispered to Fearless Sam, as a voice muttered, inaudible to any one but himself:

"Curse that skinny fool! If he had spoken out then, I should have known something that would have been worth a great deal to me."

The form retreated silently and swiftly, and Shad and the detective continued their conversation in whispers.

They were still talking earnestly, when, suddenly, a pair of arms were thrown around Sam Wilson's neck, as a woman's voice whispered in his ear:

"Save me!"

"Wal, I should say I would," returned the detective, as he gently disengaged the arms from his neck, and patted their owner on the cheek.

The Skeleton Dude, who recognized the voice, although he could not see the features of the fair visitor, pulled at his goatee and slickened his hair, from mere force of habit.

"What is the matter?" inquired the detective.

"Leonard—"

"Ha! That young feller will get himself into serious trouble afore he's through," observed Sam.

"He threatens the life of Dale Graham, as well as mine, and I am afraid to be near him at all. That is why I have come at this time of night to see you. Were he to see me talking to you, and know what I am saying, my life would not be worth a moment's purchase, nor Dale's either."

Sam Wilson polished his bald head vigorously with his silk handkerchief—a sure sign that he was thinking deeply.

"When did all this hyar take place?"

"Last night, while you were out billing the town."

"Ab! I shall have to keep a closer eye on him than I have. Look hyar, Belle. You go to your tent and sleep till morning. He won't interfere with either you or Dale to-night. In the daylight I shall be better able to know what to do. See?"

"Yes," answered Belle Howard. But she spoke in a tone that betrayed a great deal of apprehension, nevertheless.

The detective noticed it, and he said, at once:

"I'll walk over with you to the tent, if you don't like to go alone."

"Thank you, very much," returned Belle Howard, gratefully.

The detective gave her his arm, and they strolled across the big space on which the circus was pitched, the women's tent being at the other extremity.

"Well, that don't seem to me to be quite square," grumbled the Skeleton Dude, as he strained his eyes watching the retreating figures of the detective and the girl. "He knows that

I have a notion to that Belle Howard, and that I want to pay her any little attentions that a gentleman can offer a lady."

The dude had spoken audibly, because he was excited, and he did not hear footfalls that would have caught his quick ear at once otherwise.

"Quite right, Shad. Quite right," said a voice, and the Skeleton Dude started as he recognized the voice of Leonard Merville.

"What did you say?" asked Shad:

"I say it is quite right to take care of the ladies, and I congratulate you upon being such a thorough ladies' man."

"Thanks!" returned Shad, with as much irony as he could convey into his squeaky voice. "I hope I know how to behave myself."

"I hope so. But, let me give you a word of advice. Tell Sam Wilson not to interfere with ladies of my acquaintance, if he values his life," hissed the other, as he walked swiftly across the circus ground after the detective and Belle Howard.

"By thunder! I suppose it is my fault that he has gone after them. If there is murder done, I shall be to blame. I'll go after him. If there is to be a fight, I want to be counted in."

The Skeleton Dude dashed after the young man as rapidly as possible, and as he had not much to carry in the way of flesh, he made good time. He was soon close behind Leonard Merville, while a little in front of him could be seen the detective and Belle Howard walking leisurely along, Fearless Sam's right being thrust carelessly into the right pocket of his sack coat, wherein the Skeleton Dude knew there was a 44-caliber revolver ready for instant use being actually in the hand of the detective.

Shad held a revolver in his own hand, and was prepared to use it at the first sign of treachery on the part of Leonard Merville. Altogether, it will be seen that the jealous young man with the black mustache and curly hair was not to have things his own way without the possibility of a fight.

"Curse him!" hissed Merville. "How easily I could knock his miserable brains out. It is strange how the love of a girl will alter a man's feeling toward another. Twenty-four hours ago I rather liked Sam Wilson. Now, that he has stepped in between Belle Howard and me, I find myself his deadly enemy. Well, well, it is the way of the world. Nine homicides out of every ten are directly or indirectly the work of women."

Leonard Merville found himself philosophizing thus almost unconsciously as he stole softly after the detective and the girl, while his own footsteps were dogged by the skeleton dude, who would have shot him down like a dog at the first indication of his injuring the detective.

Fearless Sam had a faithful follower in Shadow Koffey.

Reaching the doorway of the tent in which the couches of the women were prepared, the detective stopped and took the girl's hand, reassuringly.

"Now, go in and sleep, like a good girl. It is so late now that you cannot have more than three or four hours. It must be three o'clock, and you know everything will be on the move early. There is a street parade to commence at eleven o'clock, and it will take some time to get things ready."

"Fearless, I trust you to protect me on this trip against Leonard Merville."

"I will."

"And still more, to keep Dale Graham and him apart. If they do come to blows again, I am afraid that there will be murder done."

"Never fear. I'll watch them," answered the detective, cheerily, as he passed his silk handkerchief over his bald head, and fanned himself with his Panama hat.

"Well, good-night."

"Good-night."

She shook hands heartily with the detective, and held his hand in hers for a moment, as if loth to let him go. Then, with a smothered sigh, she hastily lifted the flap of the tent and disappeared.

The detective stood where she had left him, still polishing away at his head, as his custom was when perplexed. He was evidently in doubt about what he should do.

At last he turned and walked away.

As he did so he almost touched a figure hiding in the shadow of the tent—a figure that grasped a revolver, and that scowled at him with a murderous expression as he strolled by.

"Curse him! I should like to! But—never mind! I shall have plenty of other opportunities. In fact, I will make them as sure as my name is Leonard Merville," muttered the man, as the gleaming bald head made itself apparent even in the gloom that would have hidden anything less effulgent.

"Good boy, Shad. I'm much obliged to you for coming after me to see that I was not the victim of foul play. You are a good man in a shooting affray. No one could hit you unless he was a better sharpshooter than I ever met," said the detective, cheerfully, as he came up with the Skeleton Dude, who had not missed a single incident while Sam and Belle Howard had been standing by the doorway of the tent.

"It's all right, Fearless, to make fun of my thinness, but I tell you there is mischief in that Leonard Merville."

"I know it."

"And he is sneaking around that tent now. He was ready to pounce on you, but if he had, he would never have had a chance to do anything else. I'd have shot him down in a minute."

The two men walked away, and as soon as they were out of sight Leonard Merville came out of his hiding-place, and stepped to the flap of the doorway, just inside of which Belle Howard had been standing, watching the disappearance of the detective.

He thrust his hand inside the doorway and pulled the girl outside, before she knew he had even seen her.

"Belle," he whispered, hoarsely. "If you want to save the lives of your two friends, you'll change your behavior toward me."

"What two friends?"

"You know, well enough."

"I suppose you mean Fearless Sam and—"

"Dale Graham," he said, finishing the sentence for her. "Yes, those are the friends I mean. Do you understand me?"

"What must I do?" asked the girl, faintly, as her white lips trembled so that she could hardly articulate.

"Just this: You must not refuse to speak to me. You must keep away from Dale Graham, and you must not go to Sam Wilson in the middle of the night, to ask him to protect you against me?"

"How do you know I have asked Sam to protect me?"

"I saw and heard you."

"Are you the devil?"

"Perhaps."

He smiled mockingly, and there was something so Satanic in his expression, as the girl saw it by the dim light that struggled from the lamp inside the tent, that she could almost believe he was indeed the arch fiend.

"Now, will you obey me?"

The girl looked around her, and then seemed to realize how helpless she was.

"Yes," she murmured, in a despairing voice.

"Very well. That will do. Now, you know what Old Elliott said about our doing that double trapeze turn, to-morrow. We have done it before, you know, and one short rehearsal in the morning, over the net, is all we shall need."

"Very well," she answered, indifferently.

"If any one should happen to see us here now—as they may, for people in this business are always poking their noses into other people's affairs—you can say that we were just talking over our trapeze act. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then. Good-night. Or, rather, good-morning."

He took the girl's passive hand, raised it to his lips, and was gone, as the girl staggered into the tent, the picture of utter despair.

Then, and not till then, did a young man whose fair hair glinted in the dim light from the tent, step from behind a wagon, where he had overheard all the previous conversation, and shaking his fist in the direction taken by Leonard Merville, exclaimed, in low, fierce tones:

"Very well, Leonard Merville. You will find that there are two parties to a bargain on the side of Belle Howard. Not speak to me, eh? The miserable rascal!"

CHAPTER VI.

FEARLESS SAM PUZZLED.

THE next day dawned bright and clear, and no one would have supposed that more than one tragedy had been narrowly averted among the white tents, with their waving flags, and the gayly-caparisoned horses, champing their bits, and waiting for their no less picturesquely-attired riders.

Fearless Sam was everywhere. He, with Old Elliott, directed the people where to place themselves in the procession, and saw that the various elements of the parade were in proper order.

It took a long time to get everything in order, so that the circus and its wonders would be duly impressed upon the citizens of the town, and make them all anxious to visit the show in the afternoon and evening.

The band had to be bestowed in its gilded chariot, and the animal cages drawn up in line, so that there would be no confusion when the order to move was given.

At last, everything was pronounced ready, and with a blare of brass instruments the march began, scattering the gaping boys and men who had gathered to see the start, and who had been engaged in a running fight with the canvasman ever since daylight in consequence of their persisting in intruding upon the sacred precincts of the circus ground.

Sam Wilson and Old Elliott, each bestriding showy horses, rode ahead of the band, as a sort of advance guard. After the wagon came the performers on horseback. By the side of Leonard Merville, who, in the costume of a French chasseur, looked handsomer than ever, rode Belle Howard, her bright red riding-habit and

her broad-brimmed hat with drooping white feathers setting off her blonde beauty to perfection. She smiled right and left as the procession went along the broad streets of the town, but she never turned her eyes in the direction of Dale Graham, who, being just behind her, occasionally pushed his horse forward, so that he was nearly on a level with her.

Leonard Merville hardly ever took his eyes off the girl, although he watched her in such a furtive way that one would hardly have known that he was looking at her.

Further back in the parade, but not so far away that he could not see Belle Howard, was Shadow Koffey, the "Skeleton Dude." He was on a softly-cushioned seat in a handsome chariot drawn by two donkeys. By his side sat the clown, who was handling the reins and driving with a burlesque imitation of a stage-driver that drew forth roars of laughter, rather to the disgust of the Skeleton Dude, who preferred that the people should be impressed with his dignified aspect, rather than by what he mentally stigmatized as the vulgar humor of the clown.

Behind the Skeleton Dude and clown were the animal-cages, closed and gaudily painted, and objects of intense interest to the people who lined the streets and cheered each feature of the procession.

The parade went all through the town, the band playing loudly, especially in front of the newspaper office, the principal hotel and the post-office, and then, pursuing a devious way, so as to cover as much of the town as possible, made a *detour* toward the circus-grounds again, followed by the shouting, excited multitude.

Had Belle Howard kept her compact, so far, with Leonard Merville?

Leonard himself was not sure that she had, but he had watched her so closely that he could hardly think she had a chance to talk to either the detective or Dale Graham. The mere fact of Dale trying to get near Belle did not trouble Leonard. He knew that that was natural, and he felt that it depended altogether on the girl whether or not his fair-haired rival managed to press his suit.

As for Sam, although he had apparently been so busy with the arrangements of the parade, he had been wide awake as to the movements of the young girl and her persecutor, besides keeping an intelligent and watchful eye on Montgomery. He had been told all about the money in the secret compartment of the Englishman's trunk, and he meant to find out where that money had come from at the first opportunity.

"He's a very innocent young man, is that bloomin' covey," thought the detective, "but if he isn't the fellow that worked the Pittsburg bank job, I'm a ghost, that's all."

Handel Montgomery, in the red coat and top-boots of a fox-hunting squire of England, rode a big, bony horse, and with his red whiskers, red face, and very red nose, presented such a comical appearance that the people laughed at and cheered him as much as they did the clown.

The parade was nearly over, and the circus grounds were in sight, when Dale Graham rode boldly forward and laid his hand on Belle Howard's bridle-rein, glancing contemptuously full into the face of Leonard Merville at the same time.

"Belle!"

The girl looked at Merville and shrank away from Dale Graham, without answering him.

Leonard Merville muttered "Beware!" in a fierce whisper and the girl shrank still more from her lover, as she gave her horse a cut with her riding-whip and made him curvet so that Graham was obliged to take his hand off the bridle.

Merville laughed and tossed his head so that the plume on his glittering helmet danced again.

Graham grew white with rage, and his hand, grasping a heavy whip, was raised with evident intention of striking his rival to the earth, when his arm was caught, and Fearless Sam rode between the two men, smiling and unconcerned as usual.

"What's the matter, boys?" he demanded, good-humoredly. "Something ruffling you?"

"He—" began Dale, but Sam Wilson interrupted him with:

"Never mind about talking now. We can settle our matters of business on the boat or in the tent. Must not let the public into our secrets, you know. It's unprofessional."

Leonard sneered at him with a look of venomous hate, and touching his horse with his heel, hastened after the girl, who had already got away from the quarreling young men, and was riding by the side of Handel Montgomery, very much to that red-whiskered gentleman's gratification.

"See here, Sam Wilson, you want to keep out of my way. I have told you before," hissed Merville.

"That so? Wal, I always thought myself good company for honest men," was Sam Wilson's smiling response.

Merville started and a look of indescribable hatred and apprehension crept into his face.

"What do you mean?" he hissed, as his hand involuntarily sought his hip pocket. "Do you mean to say that I am a thief?"

The detective could not help a shadow of sur-

prise and suspicion crossing his face, but it was gone in an instant, as he replied:

"Why, you are not a bank robber, or anything of that sort, are yer? Eh?"

This apparently careless shot seemed to reach its mark, for Merville jerked at his curb-rein so suddenly and viciously that he pulled his horse almost upon his haunches.

"Halloa, Leonard! I thought you were a good rider. That ain't no way ter handle er thoroughbred," went on Fearless, amiably, apparently more interested in the horse than his rider, but keeping such a close eye on Merville that every twitch in his face was seen and noted.

"You are just hastening the day of our reckoning, that's all, Sam Wilson," whispered Leonard, fiercely. "What do you suppose I had to do with robbing your Pittsburg bank? I believe you are getting crazy."

The detective could hardly keep from shouting, so great was his delight and astonishment at this remark of the young man's.

"By ginger!" he thought. "This is getting mighty interesting! The young fellow has given himself away this time. Here I have been looking for a clew, and one falls right into my fingers!"

The party were near the circus tents by this time. In fact the band-wagon had already reached its place, and the musicians, glad the parade was over, were taking their instruments into the dressing-tent, and preparing to take their mid-day meal in the cooking-tent, where long tables were already arranged for those who did not care to go aboard the boat.

As the horses stopped, Dale Graham leaped from his saddle, and was by Belle Howard's side in an instant.

"Belle, give me your hand."

The girl hesitated, for Merville was approaching.

"Dale, I—" she stammered.

"Get out of that, you dog!" whispered Leonard, scowling at the fair-haired young man.

Dale Graham's reply was to push him away with his elbow.

Ever ready with his pistol, Merville had his hand upon it, when the detective, who had been standing near, saw the movement, and seized the wrist before the pistol could be drawn.

"Keep that thing in your pocket, Leonard Merville. This is no time for shooting. Wait till after the afternoon show, and I will see you, and give you all the chance to shoot that you may want."

Leonard jerked his hand away without answering, but did not draw his revolver, although Dale Graham, with a smile of triumph, took the hand of Belle Howard, and with a graceful movement, assisted her to leap lightly to the ground.

"Belle!" said Leonard, warningly.

The girl, without deigning to look at him, much less answer him, took Graham's arm, and both strolled toward the dressing-tents, where Leonard saw them part with a hand pressure, that brought a flush into the girl's face. She smiled and said a few words lightly to her companion, who looked around triumphantly, as he went into the men's apartment with a light step that betokened his thorough satisfaction with things in general.

"So! They have defied me, eh?" said Merville, aloud, but to himself, as he supposed.

"Evidently," responded the voice of Sam Wilson who had been just behind him, although he had not noticed him.

"Curse you, Sam Wilson! I mean to make you answer for the insult you offered me just now."

"What do you mean?" asked Fearless, innocently.

"You intimated that I robbed the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg, and I mean to make you give your reasons for saying so," replied the young man, as he walked away.

"Wal, if this isn't a picnic, Sam Wilson, you never had one! I didn't say a word to that impetuous young feller about a bank,—at least of a Pittsburg bank, and hyar he goes an' says he didn't rob the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg. Wal, Leonard Merville may not be done that thar job, but ef he doesn't know something about it, he must be blessed with second sight, or clairvoyance, or something."

This was an occasion that required of Sam to take off his broad Panama hat and apply his silk handkerchief to his shiny poll. So he rubbed away at his head until it looked like a sun that had somehow alighted in the circus grounds on the detective's shoulders.

He was still polishing away at his bald head when he felt himself touched on the arm.

He turned quickly, but at first could not see anything. Then the Skeleton Dude came into view.

"Shadow, what makes you stand sideways? No one can see yer until you give them the broad side of you," he said laughingly.

"Quit your fooling, Fearless. I was behind one of the horses. You know that."

"No. Honest Injun! I thought you were right hyar, only with your side toward me. But, never mind. What hev yer found out this morning—anything?"

"Nothing, except that I think that Englishman is going to put his money somewhere else."

I saw him at his trunk again this morning, and he took out one or two packages and hid them about his clothes. He has them with him now."

"Ha!"

"Hush!" whispered the Skeleton Dude, as he began to pull at his waxed goatee in an ostentatiously unconcerned manner. "Here he is."

"I say," broke in the red-whiskered concertina-player, as he stepped up, hot and redder than ever from his equestrian exercise in the procession, "I want to speak to one of you blokes."

"Which of us?" asked Shad.

Montgomery looked at the Skeleton Dude with ill-concealed contempt.

"Well, blow me tight! You are a sight. I don't want you. I do not associate with freaks."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when Shad flew at him and aimed a blow at the other's chest with his bony fist.

His fist reached its mark, but the Skeleton Dude was so overcome with his exertion that he fell back into Fearless Sam's arms completely exhausted, while Montgomery, who had hardly felt the blow, burst into a fit of laughter that could be heard all over the grounds.

"Crikey! If that ain't the bloomin'est joke I ever saw! Shadow, what did you do that time? You almost brushed a fly off my coat. At least you would have done so, only there ain't no flies on me. Haw, haw, haw!"

"Idiot," muttered the Skeleton Dude, loftily, as he stalked away to the cook-tent to get his dinner.

"What do you want, Mr. Montgomery?" asked the detective, as he returned his silk handkerchief to his pocket and put on his hat.

"Just this. You have been recommended to me as a thoroughly honest man. I heard of you long before I joined this show."

"Thanks!" put in the detective, parenthetically.

"And I want you to tell me where I can put fifty thousand dollars safely."

"What is the matter with the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburgh? Isn't that a good bank?"

The detective bent a keen glance upon his companion's face as he said this, but there was not a tremor in the voice or the slightest change in the expression of the Englishman, as he answered:

"I don't know. I never heard of the bank. Do you think it is a good one?"

"Wal," thought the detective. "Either he is one of the coldest crooks I ever met, or he is innocent." Then he said, aloud: "I think it is a good bank. But give me a little while to think of it. I shall be glad to give you my advice say after the show to-night, as soon as we get packed on board the boat again."

"Thanks! You are awfully good," returned Montgomery, as he gave the detective's hand a friendly squeeze and walked away.

"The plot thickens! It's gittin' so thick I can't see through it," was Fearless Sam's comment to himself, as he, too, walked toward the cook-tent.

CHAPTER VII. CANADA JACK.

SAM WILSON went about his business in getting ready for the afternoon performance, and had no time to think about the bank robbery and the peculiar manner in which Leonard Merville and Handel Montgomery seemed to be associated with it, while not being connected with each other, so far as he could see.

Old Elliott raged around, giving orders and getting things into shape, finally taking his place in the ticket-wagon, and selling tickets with lightning speed to the people who were so anxious to get into the circus that they could hardly wait for their tickets.

At last all were in, and Sam, standing outside the big tent, was polishing at his head with his silk handkerchief and thinking about the robbery and the complications that had arisen in the matter since he had taken it hand.

The music in the big tent came out in loud gusts of harmony, generally with a good deal of big drum and much blaring of the brass instruments, while ever and anon the cheers of the audience, like distant thunder, broke through the other sounds usual to a show of the circus kind, including the roaring of the wild animals and the gruff commands of the tent men to boys to "come out of that," when they were detected trying to crawl under the tent.

"If I could only get hold of some of that money, perhaps I could get some of the bank people to identify it," thought Sam, as he moved away into a corner of the circus ground, where the animal-wagons hid a small spot from general view.

A sudden idea struck him, and he drew from his pocket a note he had found at the post-office addressed to him, that morning.

"Pittsburg post-mark, eh? Yes, an' by gosh, hyar's the name of the bank on the outside of the envelope. Been so busy I never even looked at it."

He opened the envelope and found only a few words on the paper inside, marked "Confidential." It went on to say: "The numbers of two of the bills were 1001 and 1002. Only ones

that are known. We found this out by accident, just now. They may be a clew."

"May be a clew, eh? Wal, I should say!" muttered Sam, and tearing the note into four pieces, he carefully set fire to them with a match. He held them till the last vestige of the paper was destroyed, and then walked toward the sheltered spot referred to, and found himself in the midst of a deeply-engrossed group.

A tall fellow, dressed in a suit of very loud, cross-barred pattern, and wearing a shiny silk hat, was holding a small square board, about the size of a good-sized school slate on his left arm, the left hand clutching a dozen or so of crumpled bank notes. On the board were three halves of walnut shells and a little black ball about the size of a pea.

He was talking rapidly, in this strain:

"Come along, gentlemen; make your game! I'll fool you if I can! It is the eye against the hand! That is all. Here are three shells and one little ball! The ball is under one of the shells every time! If you can guess which shell it is under, why bet any sum over two dollars, and you may win two! Here is the little joker. Who wants to bet he can tell where it is? Don't take any bet under two dollars. Make your game, gentlemen. You can see how it is. If you can win, all right. If I lose I don't kick. My loss is your gain. Ha! Here is a gentleman guesses right for a ten-dollar bill. Here you are, sir—two fives. I lose this time. Well, never say die! There's plenty of money in the world, even if I don't get it all."

There were two or three people betting on the game, and Sam saw the operator hand the two fives to a meek-looking old man, who made extravagant expressions of joy at the winning.

"Thet old feller is ther best capper I ever saw," muttered Sam. "He looks just like ther genuine article."

For the benefit of the uninitiated, it may be stated that a capper is a confederate, who pretends to win, and thereby encourages victims to stake their money on the game, and, of course, lose it.

The "shell," or "hull," game, here described is one of the best known of the many swindles that are to be found in the wake of circuses, and it is also one of the most successful, when done by a skillful operator, since the victim always finds himself mistaken.

Sam watched the game for a minute or two, and then, catching the eye of the operator, said:

"Canada!"

"That's my name," responded the shell man. "I want to see yer."

"All right, Samuel." Then, to the players around his board: "Gentlemen, the game is closed for this afternoon. Come and see me this evening."

As the crowd dispersed Canada Jack doubled up his board, which was hinged in the middle, and slipped it into a pocket, with the shells, and looked at Sam, inquiringly.

"Canada, you know ther lay I am on here?"

"Cert; I'm with you."

"Wal, I think I hev er clew, and I must have your help."

"All right; command and I'm at your call."

"Find out how much money Leonard Merville has."

"When?"

"To-night, if possible."

"I will."

"That will do. Don't stay talking to me. I am only Sam Wilson to the people around this show, except to you and the Skeleton."

Jack nodded. He never wasted words and generally spoke in monosyllables except when engaged in playing his game, and then a stream of talk was a matter of business.

"Meet me right after the show on the bow of the boat, and tell me what you know."

Jack nodded again.

"By the way—"

Canada Jack had been walking away, but he stopped as the detective spoke, and waited for the rest of the sentence.

"How did your game pan out?"

"Ten dollars," was Canada's brief reply, as he disappeared around the wagons, leaving the detective thinking about his next move.

"He's a good fellow for a grafter. Perhaps his mode of making a living is not above criticism, but, he's always all right with me, so I have nothing ter say. Now ter see what Merville is about. I hev so many things ter watch just now that it is enough ter make me bald-headed."

Sam chuckled in his own quiet way, and again had recourse to the polishing process to assist him in his meditations.

He strolled into the tent and was just in time to hear Old Tom announce to the audience, in his foghorn voice, that "Signor Merville and Mademoiselle Belle Howard," would perform a wonderful double leap-for-life on the high trapeze that night, and that he hoped to see all his friends in the town at the evening performance, to enjoy the most marvelous and thrilling aerial act that had ever been witnessed in the United States.

As the old man bowed to the audience and retired to the dressing-tent, Sam felt a touch on his shoulder.

He turned and saw Belle Howard, in the spangled skirts of a barebacked rider, standing just inside the dressing-tent, and looking at him with an expression of awful agony in her eyes.

"What's the matter, Belle? Not afraid of the horse, are yer?" asked the detective, with real concern.

He knew that circus performers sometimes lost their nerves without any apparent reason, and that when this happened the chances of their making a "mistake" during their acts was so great that they often refused to make the attempt to go through their work.

Belle Howard smiled contemptuously at the detective's question.

"Afraid of the horse? No, indeed! Old White Cloud is as safe as a baby's cradle, and I can move about as easily on his back as I can on a barn floor."

"Wal, what's ther matter with yer, then?"

He saw that the girl was pale, even through the dash of rouge on her cheeks, and that her eyes were unnaturally bright, even allowing for the artful lines of black put on with a paint-brush, to make them sparkle.

She looked behind her to make sure that there was no one within earshot, and then whispered:

"Look at Leonard."

"Where is he?"

"Just coming on for his jockey act."

There was a loud burst of music, and a powerful gray horse dashed into the ring and ran around, while the ringmaster cracked his long whip and encouraged him to gallop faster.

As he completed the circle something in red and black sprung from behind the clown, and the audience burst into wild applause as Merville, in a red and black jockey costume, made a leap from the ground, and stood on the haunch of the gray horse, first on one foot and then on the other, waving his cap at the multitude.

It was a dashing feat, cleverly done, but the girl saw that he was not entirely occupied with the horse. As soon as he reached the back of his steed his eyes fixed themselves upon Belle Howard in a half-pleading, half-threatening gaze, and never wavered all through his succeeding feats.

"What's he looking at?" whispered Sam to the girl.

"At me."

"Um! What for?"

"Just now he asked me whether I would promise to become his wife as soon as we reached New Orleans. I said no. We had a few hot words, and he swore that I should regret my determination inside of twelve hours."

"Buncombe! He's said that sort of thing before. I told you that you hed Sam Wilson at yer back, and that's Dale Graham, too. He loves yer, an' will go through fire and water fer yer. As fer Leonard—"

"Well, what of him?" hissed Leonard, himself, who had leaped from the back of his horse within a few feet of the detective, and heard his last words.

Before Fearless Sam could reply Leonard had leaped upon the back of his steed again, and was away, but now he kept both the detective and the girl within the range of his vision, and there was an ugly, threatening expression in it that Sam did not like, on the girl's account. For himself, he did not know what fear meant.

"He is harmless," he whispered to the girl, to keep up her courage.

"Perhaps," answered Belle, wearily. "But just after our conversation Old Tom went out and made that announcement about our doing the double leap-for-life to-night, and I saw a smile under that cruel mustache of Leonard's that made me shiver all over, and I cannot get over it, try as I will."

"Oh, you are cold, that is all, in that thin dress. Why don't you keep a shawl on till you have to go into the ring?" asked the detective, kindly.

"I have just thrown it off. I felt as if I should suffocate."

Merville's jockey act came to a close, and the clown did some comic tumbling, to the accompaniment of the ringmaster's whip.

Then the white horse, White Cloud, was led into the ring, and Belle Howard, with a last imploring look at the detective, to which he responded with a reassuring smile, bounded forward and bowed and smiled as if she had not a care in the world.

"Why, who have we here?" cried the clown, as he led her forward. "It's Miss Belle Howard, the prettiest, best bare-back rider in the world. Would you like to take a spin on this beautiful white horse, Miss Howard?"

The girl smiled graciously on him, and taking one of his hands, she placed her foot in the other and leaped, lightly as a bird, on the back of the horse, standing on it, as she had said to the detective, as easily as if it had been a barn floor.

"Poor girl! Thar's danger for her, I'm afraid," muttered the detective, as he turned thoughtfully away, meeting the gaze of Leonard Merville fixed balefully upon him, as he did so.

CHAPTER VIII.
THE LEAP FOR LIFE!

It is the evening performance.

The tent is crowded, and every act has been going with roars of applause. The crowd is good-natured, and as the show is anything but bad, general satisfaction has been felt with it.

Neither Leonard Merville nor Belle Howard have appeared so far, and it is generally understood that the double leap-for-life trapeze act they will do is all that ought to be demanded of performers in one night.

Old Tom Elliott has in fact made a speech early in the evening to the effect that the feat requires so much strength and endurance that it would not be safe for Signor Merville and Miss Belle Howard to use up their vitality by horseback performances. He hopes that the audience will therefore kindly excuse their appearing in anything but this great, marvelous, intrepid act, etc., etc.

The audience applauds, and Old Tom, satisfied of having worked up the people to a proper appreciation of the leap-for-life act, goes into the tent, and, in his husky voice, advises Belle Howard to show the world what she can do in the leap-for-life, because the audience will not be satisfied with anything but neat, clean work.

"All right, Tom. Don't you worry about me," responds the girl.

She has not seen Leonard since the afternoon, and since Fearless Sam has assured her over and over again that she need have no fear, she has got over her nervousness, and is something like herself once more.

At last, the time arrives for the leap-for-life. The tent men go into the ring, and place a ladder against the tent pole, so that one of them can climb up and see if the ropes and wires that hold the swinging bars are firm.

There is no necessity for this part of the performance, because the ropes have been tested over and over again in private, but it has an awe-inspiring effect upon the audience, which is what Old Tom is after.

Then there is a clash of music, and Leonard Merville, in acrobatic costume of his favorite red and black, comes forward, leading Belle Howard, who is in white, and glittering with silver spangles.

Two ropes have been let down from the top of the tent by the tent men, one at each end of the oblong tent. Up these ropes Leonard and Belle climb simultaneously, and are standing each on a little platform facing each other, but separated by nearly the length of the tent.

Each seizes a trapeze bar, that has been held within reach by a thin cord. They untie the cords and let them drop, and the audience shivers as it notes what a long way the cords have to fall to reach the ground.

All these little things have their effect, and circus people know it so well that they are careful never to omit any of them.

Belle glances gayly around her, but has not yet looked into Merville's face. He, on the other hand, has never removed his gaze from her since he took up his position on his platform.

The music has been playing loudly during the tests of the ropes, and the climbing up of the performers. Now it stops, and Old Tom walks into the ring to address the audience.

He tells them that the feats they are about to see have been attempted by but few trapezists, and that they are attended with great danger.

The audience shivers a little in intense enjoyment of the possibility that one or both of the performers may be crushed to death before their eyes, and they applaud loudly as Old Tom bows and retires.

Now for the first time, Belle looks across the vast expanse into the eyes of Leonard Merville.

He is glowering at her with an intense gaze that may mean anything, but that certainly conveys love and jealousy with other sentiments.

Belle opened her mouth as if she would speak, but she realized at once that Leonard could not hear her unless she shouted so that her words would be audible to every one in the tent. Moreover, she had nothing particular to say. It was only the involuntary desire to do something to make him remove his baleful stare from her face.

The music stopped.

"Are you ready?" cried Merville, in clear, distinct tones.

This was the regular thing in such performances, and Belle Howard replied, mechanically:

"Ready!"

The music struck up a waltz, and to its long swinging cadences two performers shot away from the little platforms upon which they had been standing and met in the midst of space clinging to their trapeze bars.

Once, twice, they swung across the great tent, and then back to their platforms. This was merely to keep up the excitement. So far they had done nothing but to show the strength of their arms and their confidence in themselves and each other.

They now stood facing each other ready for one of the perilous "leaps for life."

But something bad taken place, although the audience had been in ignorance of it.

When the girl and young man had met in the center of the tent, far above the heads of the people, Leonard had whispered to Belle:

"You know what I said to you this afternoon?"

"Yes," faltered the girl, breathlessly.

Then they swung back out of earshot of each other, but only to come together again.

"What is your answer?" asked Leonard, looking straight into her eyes within a few inches of her face.

"No!" cried Belle, defiantly, and the two bars parted, and the girl and man were on their platforms.

Fearless Sam, standing at the entrance of the dressing-tent, where he could see everything, had noticed that the two had spoken to each other, and drew his own conclusions.

He looked back into the tent and beckoned to some one.

Canada Jack and Dave Graham came forward, the "grafter" in his suit of loud clothes and Dale in the easy tight-fitting costume of a circus rider.

"Boys!" said the detective, keeping his eyes on the two figures on the platform forty feet above their heads.

"Well, governor. What is it?" responded Canada Jack, while Dale, watching Belle, did not say a word, but listened.

"I don't trust that fellow. If he makes her miss her tip, or anything of that kind, we want to be ready."

"All right," answered Canada Jack, in a matter-of-fact way.

"He would never do such a thing, surely," groaned Dale Graham, hoarsely, as the bare idea of what might happen sent a shiver through his frame.

"Don't you bank on anything he wouldn't dare to do," was the detective's cool response. "I have seen men do desperate things when they were jealous of a girl."

"You bet!" added Canada Jack, in a tone of conviction.

"Watch!" said Fearless Sam, as the music changed to another waltz and the performers got ready for a swing across the tent.

Leonard and the girl sprung from their platforms again, and when they had met once, Leonard, by a dexterous movement let himself down so that he was hanging to the bar by his knees, head down; and hands outspread.

"Now look sharp!" warned the detective.

"All right, governor," from Canada Jack—Dale Graham silent but attentive.

Like a flash of light the girl came across the space, and then, as she approached Leonard, she let go of her own bar and grasped his hand. He swung back and she reached his platform, as he released her, and dashing back, caught her empty trapeze and swung upon the platform she had just left.

Their places were now reversed, the feat having been performed with the utmost neatness and certainty.

Dale Graham heaved a great sigh of relief.

"All right, governor?" observed Canada Jack.

"So far," was the detective's response. "Wait a little till they are through."

"All right." The performers stood for a few moments to regain their breath, while old Tom walked into the ring, and motioning to the music to stop, made another speech.

"A wonderful feat will now be performed," he announced. "I would ask the audience not to make any noise while it is being done!"

The audience was duly impressed, and Old Tom, with a sly wink at the detective, stepped to one side and nodded to the orchestra to resume operations.

Now the girl looked at Leonard more earnestly than at any time since they had been on the trapeze. He has a curious expression in his eyes that she does not understand, but that does not reassure her.

But, there is no time for conjecture. The music is playing and everything is ready for the performance.

Belle turns around so that her back is toward Leonard.

In this position she swings out, he being upside down, as before.

They meet in the center, and Belle looks over her shoulder to gauge her distance.

Back they go again, and then once more into space, Belle with her back toward the young man.

As they meet for the second time, Belle lets go of her trapeze and swings around to catch his hands.

"Look out, boys!" commands the detective, whose eyes are riveted on the girl.

Canada Jack appears to be careless, but, he is just as vigilant as Fearless Sam, while Dale Graham, breathing hard and quick, is in an agony of suspense.

Leonard watches the girl, and has his hands outstretched. Then, as she turns around in the air, to grasp his hands, he—deliberately draws his hands back.

A sharp cry bursts from the girl's lips, as she realizes that she is lost, and then, as a groan breaks forth from the audience, she plunges down to the ground, headlong!

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED FOE.

WHEN Canada Jack left the detective in the afternoon, after closing his "shell game" behind the wagons, temporarily, he walked briskly to a distant corner of the grounds, where a tent was devoted to the exhibition of freaks and curiosities, living and inanimate.

"I guess I'll talk to the Skeleton," he muttered. "He is pretty sharp, if he is thin."

There was a large canvas picture of the Living Skeleton outside one of the side-show tents, and into this tent Jack walked with the assurance of a man who was well known to everybody there.

Tim Koffey, the Skeleton Dude, was dressed in a suit of clothes that fitted him so tightly that it was wonderful how he had ever got into them. He was walking about, while Handel Montgomery was playing a solo on his concertina at the other end of the tent, with awful contortions of his visage, as if it were very hard work to get the right notes out of his instrument.

"Shadow," said Canada Jack.

"What do you want?" asked the Skeleton Dude, with dignity.

"Where's Leonard Merville's trunk?"

The Skeleton looked at him suspiciously.

"Say, Canada, you haven't got as low as that, have you?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you want to know anything about Merville's trunk for?"

The gambler looked at Shadow for a moment with indignation blazing in his eyes. Then he chuckled, as if highly amused.

"You think I want to go through his trunk, eh, Shad? Well, you must be excused for being suspicious. But, that is not it. I want to know what he has in it, for the benefit of the governor."

"Fearless?"

"Yes."

The Skeleton shook his head.

"You are on the wrong lay," he said. "So is Fearless. Merville has nothing in his trunk. He is not the man in that bank scrape."

"Who is?"

The Skeleton Dude slyly pointed with his thumb over his shoulder at the unconscious Handel, who was twisting himself into all sorts of shapes in the concluding agonies of his concertina solo.

"What do you mean?"

The Skeleton Dude screwed up his eyes into an expression of intense knowingness, as he whispered:

"I have seen the money in his trunk."

Jack reflected for a moment. Then, as if he had made up his mind, he whispered:

"I guess you are right, but I should like to have a look at Leonard Merville's trunk, all the same."

"Well, I am through here for the present. We shall not give another show this afternoon. Come with me, and I will show you. The trunk in which Merville keeps his things is on the boat. He just brought his costumes over to shore in a valise."

The Skeleton put on a long light overcoat, that completely covered the fantastic garb he wore for exhibition purposes, and the two strolled down to the wharf, which sloped into the river. The Parole was moored out in the water some distance from shore, on account of the shallowness of the river, and it was necessary to row out to her in a skiff. Canada Jack took the oars, and with a few powerful strokes had the boat alongside the Parole.

In five minutes the two men were aboard the boat, and were among the heap of trunks and general lumber on the lower deck.

"There's his trunk. That big black one, that looks as if it had been traveling about the world for fifty years or so," observed the Skeleton.

"But how are you going to open it?"

Canada smiled, as he walked carelessly over to the trunk and tapped it on the lid, as if asking it a question. He had never been a thief, but those long, supple fingers of his, that manipulated shells and cards so easily, were dexterous at anything he chose to do. One glance at the lock of the trunk convinced him that he could pick it without trouble.

He drew forth a pocket-knife that had a corkscrew attachment among other things, and that was just what he needed at the present juncture.

"Going to open a bottle of wine?" asked the Skeleton, jocularly.

"Maybe."

As Jack thus spoke, in a light tone, he was perhaps as near death as a man could be and live.

A dark face, evil in its expression, was just above him, between two piles of canvas carried by Old Tom for extra tents in case of accidents.

The dark face was that of Luke, the negro!

Neither the Skeleton nor Jack saw it, however, and they were equally unconscious of the fact that Luke held a huge knife above the head of the grafter, as if he would plunge it into his breast for mere deviltry.

He held his hand, but his eyes, with more white showing than usual were fixed upon the unconscious grafter and Skeleton with an expression

that meant murder should he consider such a crime expedient.

Canada Jack applied the point of the corkscrew to the lock of the trunk and gave it a twist. The lock opened as if by a charm, and the Skeleton could hardly repress a cry of delight at the neatness of the work.

"Any one would swear you had been a cracksmen," he observed, as he bent over to obtain a view of the interior of the trunk.

He was doomed to disappointment, however.

Canada swung the lid open and was about to plunge his hand into the heap of tumbled clothing, and miscellaneous articles of use, that lay confusedly in the big receptacle, when some one caught the Shadow around the waist and sent him flying over Jack's head, upon a lot of tin cups belonging to the deck hands, and that had been slung on a cord to keep them together, and thrown carelessly on the deck.

Shadow was so dazed by the suddenness of the attack, and the rattling of the tins, that he hardly knew where he was, but he seemed to realize who was his assailant, for he spluttered:

"Darn your picture, you black cur! I'll make you pay for this."

Luke laughed contemptuously, as he leaped upon Canada Jack, knife in hand, and bore him backward to the deck.

The grafter was a wiry, powerful fellow, but he was so taken by surprise that Luke had him down, and his knee on his chest, before Jack could make any defense.

"Fore de Lawd, I'll done kill you if I find you've stole any of Mas'r Merville's things!" hissed the negro, his dirty-brown face within an inch of that of Canada Jack.

The grafter recovered his equanimity at once, for the life he led had made him used to being in tight places, and answered, quietly:

"You're a black fool! What are you talking about?"

"I saw you done open that trunk, an' I'm Mas'r Merville's valet, I am."

Canada laughed derisively.

"Well, what of it? Merville sent me here to get him a pair of tights. I saw them lying at the top of the other things as soon as I opened the trunk."

Canada Jack had indeed noticed a pair of tights, as he said, and the idea of their being made to help him out of his present predicament occurred to him on the instant. He was a man of fertile resources, and had trained himself to make use of any advantage chance threw in his way.

Luke half-turned to see whether there really were any tights in the trunk, and on the instant he found himself rolling over and over, in a desperate struggle with the white man.

The Skeleton Dude was still trying to regain his feet, and Canada Jack could not count on any help from him until it would most likely be too late.

The negro was trying to use his knife, but the grafter had his wrist in a firm grip, and while he could not get at his own bowie-knife, which bung in a sheath in his hip-pocket, he was able to prevent the negro stabbing him.

At last, with a mighty effort, Canada Jack managed to get Luke underneath, and then, following up his advantage, he snatched the big knife out of the negro's hand.

"You skunk!" he hissed, breathlessly. "I'll get you out of the way now. You'll never try to do up Canada Jack again!"

The gambler, generally cool and collected, was excited now, and it seemed as if Luke's time had come.

The white man's hand was uplifted, and Luke would have received his own knife in his heart in another instant, but that the Skeleton, who had kicked his way out of the tin cups at last, caught Canada Jack's arm and arrested the blow.

Shadow's strength was not great enough to stop the blow altogether, but he managed to divert the blow, so that it just grazed the negro's shoulder and stuck in the deck, instead of in his heart. As it was a stream of blood came from the slight wound in the shoulder, and the negro, with the excitability of his race, imagined he was badly hurt, and his courage oozed out with his blood.

"Oh, Mas'r Canada, you've done gone an' killed me. I wuzn't a-gwine to do any harm," he wailed. "I wuz only takin' car' of Mas'r Merville's trunk, as he done tolle me."

Something in the words of the negro seemed to strike Canada Jack for he drew the knife out of the deck and flung it far away from him, as he muttered:

"Perhaps the poor devil is right. He thought I had no right to go through that trunk, and perhaps I hadn't, though I'd like to have done what the governor asked me, and found out how much money Merville has."

He got up, and Luke, with a rueful countenance, struggling to his feet, too, and finding that the scratch on his shoulder was only a trifle, looked about for his knife."

"Luke," said Canada Jack.

"Yes."

"Lock that trunk. It shuts with a spring."

"Yes."

Luke did as he was directed, and seated him-

self on the trunk, as Canada Jack, beckoning to the Skeleton Dude, walked slowly to the bow of the Parole and got into the skiff, to pull to shore, with the Skeleton facing him and wondering what was to be the next move.

Luke picked up his knife, and watching the skiff pull away, his brow grew blacker than usual, as he muttered:

"You are a thief, Jack, an' I know it. If you think you are gwine to cut Luke without me gittin' even, you are fooled. I'll help Mas'r Merville now to—death!"

Canada, as he pulled at the oars, was thinking: "The nigger was right, and I'll have to try some other plan to get at the amount of cash that fellow Merville has."

The Skeleton Dude's reflections were that he was smarter than any one connected with Tom Elliott's show, because he was sure he knew that the thief of the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg was Handel Montgomery, the English concertina-player, although Fearless Sam and Canada Jack would persist in suspecting Merville.

"They'll all own that I am right in the end," observed Mr. Koffey, half aloud. "Although, by gracious, I'm not stuck on Leonard Merville! He's mean enough to be the thief, even if he isn't guilty."

CHAPTER X.

A TRIUMPH FOR THE ACROBAT.

At the moment that Merville drew his hands back, and allowed the girl to go flying headfirst toward the ground, he hardly realized what he was doing. Some fiend seemed to control him, and he could not resist the demoniacal impulse.

As for Belle, when she missed the hands that were to have swept her across in safety to the opposite platform, she closed her eyes involuntarily to meet what she felt was certain death.

She heard the roaring of the multitude, and felt herself going down, down, down!

Suddenly, she felt a fearful jar, and then became unconscious!

And Fearless Sam! What of him?

He was not altogether unprepared for a catastrophe, although he did not know in just what form it would come. He, with Dale Graham and Canada Jack, were watching so closely that every movement of the two performers was caught on the instant.

The detective saw a slight hesitation in the movements of the young man just before the girl swung herself to him the second time, and he smelt mischief.

"Ther devil!" muttered Sam.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the girl was gracefully plunging across the space, and then the treacherous hands were withdrawn, and down came Belle Howard, swift as an arrow.

A half-uttered exclamation came from the detective's lips; then he was in the middle of the ring, with Canada Jack and Dale Graham at his side.

All three, experienced in circus life, knew what to do.

They spread a little apart and extended their arms toward the center. Hardly had they done so when a terrific jar knocked Dale Graham and Fearless Sam off their feet completely, while staggering Canada Jack so that he too nearly fell.

But they cared nothing for that. Belle Howard had fallen on their arms, and thence had dropped unconscious to the sawdust. She had been shaken and frightened, but was unharmed.

This much the detective knew as soon as he had sprung to his feet and looked hastily into the face of the girl.

The three men who had borne her weight on their outstretched arms were somewhat bruised, but the girl had not suffered any injury.

The audience was wild. Shouts, screams and fainting women were general, and, to add to the hubbub, the band was playing away vigorously, with a great deal of brass and drum, in obedience to the command of Old Tom, who believed there was nothing like music to calm the nerves of the public.

"Help me carry her to the tent," whispered Sam Wilson.

Tenderly Dale Graham and Canada Jack lifted the insensible girl, and the three men carried her swiftly out of sight of the audience to the dressing-tent. Fearless Sam could have carried her by himself easily enough, but he did not wish to shake her more than was necessary, and it was better to have the assistance of his two companions.

Old Tom saw that this was a good chance for a speech, and as they let down the canvas flap that hid the interior of the dressing-tent from the audience, they heard the manager telling the people in his suave way that Miss Howard was not hurt, and that the performance would, with their "kind attention," proceed forthwith.

This did not satisfy the people, however, and shouts of "Bring her out!" "Let us see her!" "Belle Howard!" etc., rent the air.

Belle opened her eyes, and taking a glass of

water from the hand of Dale Graham, looked around her with a shiver.

"Oh, it was horrible!" she murmured. "Where is he?"

"Here!" responded a deep voice, and Merville stood before her, with a dazed expression in his dark eyes.

The girl shrunk from him, and at the same moment Dale Graham had him by the throat.

"You murderous villain!" hissed Dale, as he shook the unresisting Leonard from side to side.

"Don't be a fool, Dale."

It was the detective who spoke, and he pulled the young man away with a power that he could not resist, if he would.

Merville shook himself, with that sneering smile that was so maddening to those against whom it was directed, and held out his hand to Belle Howard.

To the surprise of Dale Graham and Canada Jack, if not of Fearless Sam, the girl, who had now recovered her customary manner, arose from the pile of rugs that had been spread on two trunks for her, and took Merville's hand.

Dale Graham seemed to be petrified with astonishment, while Canada Jack muttered to himself, in a tone of utter dismay:

"Well, if this girl don't beat any game I ever played! Wonder whether she really is gone on that fellow!"

Meanwhile the shouts of the audience outside were growing louder, and it was clear that the crowd was getting beyond control, in spite of the music, that still kept up with tremendous vigor.

Old Tom Elliott lifted the flap of the tent, and his ordinarily red face was flaming with excitement, as he exclaimed:

"For heaven's sake, Belle, come out and show yourself. You're not hurt. If you don't come out, them there devils will pull the tent down!"

"All right, Mr. Elliott; I'll bring her out," responded Leonard Merville, quietly, still holding the girl's hand.

Tom Elliott pushed up his Panama hat to scratch his head doubtfully, as he observed;

"Well, you can go out if you like, Merville, but I don't know that it will be altogether safe!"

"Pshaw!" replied Merville.

He drew Bell to the opening, pushed aside the flap, and led her into the ring.

A thunder of cheering that rolled from one end of the large tent to the other, and seemed to create a ripple in the great canvas roof, arose so soon as Belle Howard was seen, in her white costume, bowing and smiling, and evidently unharmed.

Then the multitude realized that the man in red and black who was standing with the girl was responsible for her fall, and an ominous chorus of hoots and groans mingled with the cheers.

"Come back, Leonard! Come back!" came, in a warning voice, from Old Tom, standing just at the entrance to the dressing-tent, watching with the eyes of a long experience, the temper of the crowd.

Leonard waved his hand slightly, as a token that he heard the manager's words. Then, with a smile, he advanced a step, and held up his hand to request silence from the audience while he addressed them.

For a moment it was doubtful whether he would be allowed to proceed, but something in the fearless flash of the dark eyes kept the audience from interfering, and there was almost perfect quietude as he commenced:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the accident you just witnessed, and that was, happily, unattended by any injury to the lady, will not prevent thefeat being performed. Miss Belle Howard and I will go up again and show you that we can do what we were trying when my hands slipped, and that such an error is not likely to happen again."

He bowed and stepped back to the side of the girl.

Fearless Sam looked into the face of Canada Jack, as if asking him what he thought of the situation, while Dale Graham would have jumped forward into the ring had he not been held back by Old Tom.

The manager was astonished at the audacity of the proposition, but with him the show was of the most importance, and if the performers were willing to try the act again, it was not for him to prevent them.

The girl grew white to the lips, but as Merville's hands touched her she smiled at the audience and bowed as if in acquiescence with the words of her companion in the red and black costume.

The audience cheered loudly as the tent-men, at the behest of Old Tom, dexterously threw two ropes up to the trapeze-bars, so that the young man and girl could climb up.

Lightly and swiftly, both seized their ropes, and went up hand over hand.

Now Old Tom's thorough understanding of the temper of a crowd was shown again. He saw that the performance of the "leap-for-life" would be a good thing, but he knew that another accident, that might result in hurt to the girl, would cause an attack to be made on his show, and perhaps on himself that would mean death to him.

He was equal to the occasion. He nodded to

some of his tent-men, who were just as quick at seeing a thing as himself, and four of them brought forth a square of canvas, about fifteen feet long each way, and held it under the center of the tent, just where the girl would fall if she fell at all.

This proceeding was greeted by loud cheering, and Old Tom, seeing that he had done the right thing, smiled in a self-satisfied way as he signaled to the orchestra to resume its playing.

As they did so, Fearless Sam, Canada Jack and Dale Graham stepped forward and took hold of the canvas, too.

The girl, who was standing on her little platform, looking down carelessly, smiled at the three men, and Dale Graham felt as if he must go up to her and bring her away before she could risk her life again with his rival.

There was no time for any such proceeding, however.

The two performers swung across the open space and did the first flight, described in a previous chapter, and then prepared for the feat that had resulted in Belle being thrown to the ground.

This time there was no hitch. The swing was done as neatly as anything of the kind could be, and when Belle Howard threw herself around in mid-air she caught Leonard Merville's hands and was borne safely to the opposite platform, while he, in turn, flew gracefully to the opposite.

Thunders of applause went up, and Fearless Sam and his companions carried the canvas they had been holding out of sight, satisfied that there was no danger threatening Belle now.

Dale Graham stood in the ring, however, determined that he would not allow the fiend in red and black to speak to the girl when once their double act was over.

Belle loosened a rope that hung above her head, and allowed it to drop to the ground. Then she twisted it about her, and came down headfirst, in a spiral motion that was the personification of grace. At the same time, Leonard had also loosened a rope, and just as Belle reached the ground, he shot down almost as if he were falling, and was by the side of Belle to take her hand and share with her the plaudits of the audience as she left her rope and smiled to the great crowd.

A huge bouquet of flowers was thrown into the ring, and as Leonard picked them up and handed them to her, he whispered:

"Mind what I tell you! You are mine!"

She glanced at him fearfully, yet scornfully, and tripping away, found herself in the arms of Dale Graham, just inside the dressing tent.

She pulled herself away from him, as Leonard Merville entered the tent, and with a sardonic smile, walked to the private compartment where he could change his gaudy costume for the habiliments of private life.

"I'll kill that fool yet, if he does not keep out of my way," he muttered, grinding his teeth. "He has interfered with me two or three times already, but it will not be healthy for him to keep on running against me."

While Merville was thus soliloquizing, Fearless Sam was perfecting in his mind a plan for finding out whether the young man had the Pittsburgh Bank's money, and at the same time relieving Belle Howard from his systematic persecution.

CHAPTER XI.

BELLE HOWARD'S DREAM.

It was one o'clock in the morning after the events narrated in the last chapter, and the Parole was steaming down the river for the next stop, that would be made at six o'clock in the morning.

With the exception of the pilot in his glass case on the hurricane deck, and the engineers working in the glow of their furnaces below, no sign of life was to be seen on the boat.

The continuous thumping of her machinery and the bowing and nodding of her walking-beam, were proof that some one was awake and looking after the progress of the craft, but beyond that, the Parole might have been a huge cemetery, floating with its dead toward the Gulf, and thence out to the trackless ocean.

All the circus people were tired with their long day's work, and, the tents and animals having been got aboard and stowed for their convenient carriage down the river, there was nothing to be done but to try and get up strength for the next day's toil by sleeping as soundly as might be.

And yet there was more than one wakeful person on the boat besides the pilot, engineer and other people necessary to look after the Parole during the night.

Who they all were will be developed further along.

"Luke," whispered a voice, in the impenetrable darkness where the animal cages and the tents and poles of the circus were stowed on the lower deck.

"Yes, sah."

"Listen!"

"That's what I sah g'wine ter do."

The voice that spoke to Luke, the negro, was muffled, but there was no mistaking it. It was that of Leonard Merville.

"They're on the track, and I think I shall get out of this at the first chance."

"Yes, sah."

The negro answered in a matter-of-fact tone as if he did not see anything extraordinary in this resolve of the young man.

"You will have to help me, Luke."

"Shuah!"

"Good! I supposed I could trust you."

"To the death, Mas'r Merville," returned Luke, with a fierce earnestness that contrasted strongly with his previous indifferent tone.

"Well, when I get off this boat you know who I mean to take with me, eh?"

"Shuah!"

"It may be a hard job, but—"

"We done g'wine ter do it, all the same," put in Luke, as the other paused.

"That's right, Luke, and when we get away, and everything is settled, you shall have more money than you ever saw in your life. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Mas'r Merville."

"Now, is the swag safe?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"Whar I put it—down below."

At this point there was a little rustling behind where the two men crouched by the big lion's cage, and Luke started up in a hurry.

"Fore de Lawd, Mas'r Merville, I done thought that big lion, Monarch, was gitting out again."

Merville drew a knife, and searched behind the cages, without saying a word. He returned to his former place in a minute or two and remarked:

"I wasn't quite so sure, Luke, but that there might be some one sneaking around here. But I guess it was only old Monarch moving around in his cage."

"That's all, Mas'r Merville."

Indeed, that seemed to be the cause of the slight disturbance they had noticed, for Monarch was standing up in his cage, whence his eyeballs glowed like incandescent lamps in the darkness.

"Now, Luke, remember that I may want you at any moment, and I shall expect you always to be ready."

"You can bet I'll be ready, Mas'r Merville."

"Remember, too, that there is something else I mean to do before I leave this boat!"

"What?"

"To wipe that fellow, Sam Wilson, off the face of the earth, and to thrash Dale Graham within an inch of his life, but without quite killing him. I want him to live, so that he will know I have the girl he has presumed to favor with his regard. The reptile!"

"All right, Mas'r Merville; I'm with you on that, too, but there's something I have to do, too."

"What is it?"

"You know Canada Jack?"

"The grafter! Well, what of him?"

"He cut me yesterday," said the negro in a sullen tone that was the very embodiment of hate and revenge.

"He didn't hurt you much, did he?" asked Leonard, carelessly.

"That don't matter. I'se g'wine ter kill him."

"Ah!"

"Yes, Mas'r Merville, an' I want you ter help me with him, same as I sw'ar to help you with Fearless Sam."

"Fearless Sam!" repeated Leonard, contemptuously.

"That's what they call him, an' he ain't afraid of nothing, for a fact," returned the negro, doggedly.

"All right, then, Luke, it's a bargain. There are three men to be fixed—"

"Three!" interrupted the negro. "Canada Jack, Fearless Sam and Dale Graham."

"Yes, only you should have put Sam Wilson first. He is of the most importance," laughed Leonard, in a way that indicated how little he cared for the commission of such a crime as murder, if it suited his purpose.

"Not to me, he ain't."

"Well, Luke, we'd better got to bed. I don't see any chance of our doing anything for a day or two, and we have to do our regular work with the circus until the time comes, so that there shall not be any suspicion."

Leonard strolled carelessly to the bow of the boat and looked down at the dark waters, that sparkled here and there where a star caught a ripple, or where a gleam from the lamp swinging at the mast in the very front of the boat lighted up a small patch of the rushing river.

"Belle Howard and Sam Wilson—Fearless Sam, my love and my hate," he muttered. "When shall I have you both? Before long, or my name is not Leonard Merville."

Then we went up to the main deck, and in ten minutes was sleeping in his berth as soundly as a child.

Luke stalked away to the stern, where the quarters of the deck hands were, and was soon as sound asleep as his partner in crime.

Then it was that a bull's-eye lantern was opened near the spot at which the confab had taken place between Merville and Luke, and two faces were shown in the small circle of light.

One face was smiling as if enjoying a good joke, while the other, a very thin, cadaverous visage, was evidently that of a man in considerable perturbation.

The faces were those of Sam Wilson and Shadow Koffey, the Skeleton Dude.

"Well, Fearless, the game is going on," observed the Skeleton, as he tried to read his companion's thoughts in the small portion of his visage that could be seen in the circle of light from the bull's-eye lantern.

"Splendidly!"

"You think so?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

The detective glanced at his attenuated friend with a quizzical expression. He enjoyed the Skeleton's discomfiture sometimes.

"I don't know whether I do or not," returned Shadow. "I don't think it is a good prospect when that rascally Luke is so thick with Leonard Merville. You heard what they said. They will settle you, as well as Belle Howard and Canada Jack."

"If I don't settle them," observed the detective, with a smile. "You see, it is an all-around game, without limit, and any one can take a hand that desires to do so."

"Well?"

"Well, I am not going to waste any more time over them. I have strong reason to believe that Merville was concerned in that bank job in Pittsburgh, even if he didn't do it all by himself, and I am going to bring it home to him as soon as possible. I have wasted too much time over him already. Besides—"

The detective paused, and the Skeleton looked at him inquiringly.

"Besides," went on Sam, "I am going to save that girl, and the best way to do that is to place Leonard where he cannot do harm, as soon as may be."

The Skeleton was about to reply, when, suddenly, something cold touched his hand and made him start back with a cry of deadly affright, at the same moment that the detective closed the slide of the lantern, leaving everything in black darkness.

"Holy smoke! What's that?"

There was no mistaking the genuine terror of the Skeleton Dude as he made this exclamation, and the detective, whose eyes were as sharp in the dark as a tiger's, grasped some one who had appeared between the Skeleton and himself.

"Thunder! Belle!" exclaimed the detective, but in a low, guarded tone. He was too experienced in his business to make the blunder of speaking loudly, no matter how surprised he may have been.

"Yes, Belle," responded the girl, whose cold hand on the Skeleton's wrist had made that gentleman fear that he was in the clutch of something from the other world.

"I thought you were in bed and asleep long ago," said the detective, reassuringly, as he patted her cheek in a brotherly way.

Fearless Sam had a soft heart where helplessness and innocence were concerned, however fierce he might be with villainy.

"So I was, Fearless. I was asleep, and then I had such a horrible dream, and something made me get up and come here."

"What was it?"

"I seemed to see the face of Leonard Merville, and he was waving his hands before my face, and saying to me, in a low but commanding voice: 'You must be my wife within twenty-four hours!'"

"And then?"

"Then he went on: 'Will you do as I ask you? Say yes.' I could not help myself, it seemed to me, so I said yes. Then he smiled, in the awful way that he did when we were doing the leap for life last night, just before I let go of the trapeze bar when he drew his hands back. I would have screamed, but it seemed as if my breathing were stopped, and I could not utter a word."

"A bad dream," remarked the Skeleton Dude, sententiously.

"I think it was worse than a dream," said the detective, upon whom the girl's narration was making a strong impression.

"Yes, yes, Fearless, indeed it was worse than a dream. It was like a dreadful nightmare. As soon as I said yes, Leonard hissed: 'Go down to the lower deck, and wait for me just in front of the cage of the big lion, Monarch,' and then, before I could reply, he vanished."

"Vanished?" repeated the Skeleton, inquiringly.

"Yes, that is the only way I can describe it. I did not see him walk away. Besides, when I started up, with a cry, as I recovered my breath, I found that the door of my state-room was tightly fastened, so that no one could possibly have been in the room."

"Go on," said the detective, quietly.

"I got up, threw on a wrapper, and ran down here, and—found you and Mr. Koffey."

For fully a minute the detective did not say a word, during which time the Skeleton Dude thought he could hear his heart beating above the sound of the girl's hurried breathing.

"Belle," said Fearless Sam, at last, as he took

off his broad hat and polished his head with his silk handkerchief.

"Yes?"

"Go back to your room. I can promise that you will not be disturbed again. In the morning—or rather when daylight comes, for it is morning now—I will go deeper into this thing."

The girl threw her arms around the detective's neck and wept wildly, as she clung convulsively to him.

"Oh, Fearless, you will help me, will you not? I am so afraid of Leonard. He would not stop at anything—even murder—to gain anything he had set his heart on. You don't know him."

"Don't I? Well, that is where you are mistaken, my dear. I do know him, and because I do know him I shall be able to circumvent him without so very much trouble. Come, I will go up-stairs with you and see you to your state-room door. Don't be afraid."

The girl linked her arm in his, and he led her to her room, leaving her there with a few reassuring words, and then going down to the spot at which he had left the Skeleton Dude.

"Shadow, do you know what that dream of Belle Howard's means?" he asked.

"Nightmare. That is what I told her it was," answered the Skeleton, with a superior air.

"Ah! You have only hit upon half of it," observed the detective. "There was something more than simple nightmare."

"What?"

"Hypnotism," returned the detective, impressively. "That young man, Leonard Merville, has been exercising that mysterious influence over her that science hardly understands as yet, and we have to fight the occult as well as mere human rascality."

"Moses!" exclaimed the Skeleton, rather overcome by the apparent familiarity of the detective with a power that Shadow had always regarded as mythical, or, to use his own expressive slang, "a fake."

CHAPTER XII.

A CONTEST OF WILL POWER.

A WEEK passed away, during which nothing but the routine work of the circus occupied the attention of any of the characters of this narrative. The detective, Shadow and Canada Jack kept a constant lookout to try and find out who was the thief that had captured the \$50 000 from the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg, and Fearless Sam never gave Leonard Merville a chance to disturb Belle Howard.

The detective took the girl under his especial protection, and as it did not suit the purpose of Leonard Merville to come to an open rupture again, with the detective, before the other people in the show, there was no attempt to carry out his plan to capture the girl and put Fearless Sam out of the way forever.

To an outward observer it appeared as if everything were peaceful and as if brotherly and sisterly love were the only sentiments that found a place in the bosoms of the employees of Old Tom Elliott's "greatest show on earth."

But below the smiling surface there were evil thoughts that would have broken out into a thunderstorm of bitter hate at the least provocation.

The detective must be credited with keeping things as quiet as they were. Not only was he careful not to give Leonard Merville an excuse for quarreling, but he restrained the ardor of Canada Jack and Koffey, the Skeleton Dude, that would have set all prudence at naught but for the warnings of Fearless Sam.

As for Handel Montgomery, the concertina-player, he rendered his part of the programme every day, and spent all his leisure time in examining his treasure in his trunk, and trying to devise some safe means of keeping it. It worried him to have so much money with him, even although he believed that no one suspected it. Had he known that the Skeleton Dude and Fearless Sam were so well-acquainted with his monetary affairs, he would have been much more disturbed than he was.

It was a dark night, as the Parole pulled away from a little town below Helena, Arkansas, where a performance had been given, and everything had been going along smoothly, when Leonard Merville and Fearless Sam met face to face on the lower deck at the favorite lounging-place of the young man, near Monarch's cage.

The detective had been working hard at his regular circus business of advertising the show in the town, and doing the thousand-and-one tasks that fell to him as the second in command. He had thrown himself upon a pile of canvas, and dropped into a doze, from which he was awoken by hearing his name called in a low, but sharp, tone:

"Sam!"

The voice was that of Merville, but there was a peculiar ring in it that was not always noticeable, and, quick as a flash, the detective knew what it meant.

"Sam!" repeated Leonard, as the detective did not answer.

Fearless Sam, who had slowly opened his eyes when he was first called, now fixed them upon those of Leonard with a stony gaze, as if

he saw through him, and was looking at something a long way beyond.

"Good!" muttered Leonard, under his breath. "Now my chance has come, as I thought it would."

He raised his long, thin hands, and after rubbing their palms together for a moment, waved them before the eyes of the detective.

Fearless Sam's gaze did not falter, but there seemed to be a sort of film passing over them, such as has been observed in the eyes of somnambulists.

Merville half smiled, as he kept his hands waving before the face of the detective, with a steady motion, while he looked into the eyes of Sam Wilson with his own dark orbs, as if he would read the detective's very soul.

The detective could hardly help laughing, but he saw that here was a chance to find out something about Leonard that might never come to him again.

"The young fool thinks he can hypnotize me," were the thoughts that were passing through the brain of the detective, as he pretended to yield to the influence of the young man. "He thinks he has a stronger will power than mine. Well, we shall see. But if the biter isn't bitten this time, then my name is not Sam Wilson!"

In the meantime Merville could hardly restrain his joy as he thought he saw that he had obtained control of the detective, and could make him do anything that might serve the purpose of himself (Leonard).

He kept on with his passes until he felt sure that the detective was completely overcome, as evidenced by his having allowed his chin to fall upon his chest, and his eyes to close.

"Now for it!" muttered Leonard. Then, aloud. "Sam!"

"Wal?" answered the detective, adopting the Western dialect that he generally used, but that he let drop on some occasions, as the reader has noticed in previous chapters.

"What is your business on this boat? Are you not a detective?"

"Oho," thought Sam. "He knows me, does he? I shall have to be careful, or I may give myself away."

Fearless Sam was a man of quick brain, and he weighed the matter pro and con in an instant, ere he replied. If he denied that he were a detective, when it was evident that Leonard Merville knew he was, it would prove that he was not hypnotized, but was in possession of his senses to such an extent that he could try and guard his secret. So he answered, in a monotonous tone:

"I am a detective?"

"Exactly. And you are trying to find who stole the money from the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg?"

"Yes."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"The artful young rascal," thought the detective, before he answered, in the same monotonous way:

"Handel Montgomery, the concertina-player."

Merville started, and although the detective pretended that his eyes were closed, he saw the start and understood it.

"What do you intend to do to Leonard Merville if you get the opportunity?" was the next question.

Fearless Sam paused before answering this question, because he enjoyed the eagerness of Leonard, and was determined not to gratify his curiosity too quickly. At last he said:

"He's a poor wretch, beneath my notice! He cannot do any harm, and I shall not do anything to him, except perhaps to slap his face some time to teach him to behave himself."

The young man could not repress his rage. He raised his hand as if he would strike the detective in the face, but changed his mind, and hissed, in low tone:

"Ah, well! Let him go! The time will come when I shall be revenged. It would not do to wipe him out now. I don't want to hang or go to the Penitentiary for him."

Of course these words were all perfectly audible to the detective, because Leonard, supposing Sam was under the hypnotic influence, did not trouble to speak in a very low tone.

"I am glad I know what he is going to do," thought Fearless Sam, "because I can regulate my conduct accordingly."

But now Leonard Merville showed that he was not through with the detective yet. He had laid a plan some time ago, that he was prepared to carry out at any auspicious time. That time he believed had now arrived unexpectedly.

Looking cautiously around him by the dim light of the boat's lanterns, that were kept alight all night now, while passing through the shoals of the Mississippi, where there was always danger of running aground or coming into collision with some obstruction, Leonard saw that he and the detective had this part of the deck to themselves.

The detective would have given something to look around, too, but could not without letting Merville know that he was not so much under the influence as the young man supposed, and it was not his purpose to confess the pretense just yet.

Leonard uttered a low whistle.

Scarcely had he done so, when there was

another whistle, from the detective, but in an altogether different key.

Leonard turned sharply, and looked keenly and suspiciously at the detective, who stood, with his eyes closed and his head sunk on his chest, without having moved in the slightest. He was the picture of an innocent subject of hypnotism, with no thought of guile.

"Ah, to be sure," muttered Leonard, with a little laugh. "He's under the influence, and when I whistle, he whistles too. He is a very easy subject. I can make him follow me without the least trouble."

Fearless Sam almost exploded into a fit of laughter as he heard Leonard make this explanation to himself, but he managed to control himself, and keep on the owl-like look of wisdom he had assumed as the proper expression for a man being hypnotized.

Merville whistled again, and the detective echoed the sound but in a different key.

"Confound those fellows! I hope they are listening for my signal. I have told them often enough to be ready at all times," grumbled Leonard to himself, as he made a few more passes before the detective's eyes to put him more completely to sleep.

Thought Fearless Sam: "It is a good thing I have this excuse for whistling. I am not afraid that Canada Jack and the Skeleton will not be listening. Ah! There they are!"

Although his eyes were half-closed, he discerned the Skeleton and Canada Jack moving along in the shadows, unseen by Leonard, but gradually approaching. They seemed to know and understand the situation at once, for when they were within a few yards of where Leonard Merville and Fearless Sam stood they stopped, behind Merville, but so that Sam could see them when he opened his eyes a little.

"Now let us see what this racket is to end in. I don't care so long as I have the two boys handy with guns in their pockets. That Skeleton is as good as a big man when he is armed, and he doesn't know what it is to be afraid."

Thus thought Fearless Sam, as Leonard looked around him and for the third time whistled, echoed by the detective. Fearless Sam could have got along without the whistle now, since the men he was to summon were within reach, but he had to keep up his assumed character of a hypnotic subject, so he whistled obediently whenever Leonard did the same thing.

The third whistle was not without fruit.

A shambling figure was seen coming toward him from the forward part of the boat, and Fearless Sam recognized the lank figure and peculiar gait of Luke, the negro, even before he could distinguish his features, by the dim light of the swinging lantern.

"Halloa, Luke," muttered Leonard.

"Halloa, Mas'r Leonard."

"Everything ready—the skiff and the provisions?" asked Leonard.

"What in thunder is coming now?" thought the detective.

"Everything is done ready," answered Luke.

"All right. Then follow us."

"Deed I will," answered the negro, although the distention of his eyes, so that they showed a great deal of white, proved that he was very much mystified at the spectacle of Fearless Sam standing in such a peculiar way in front of Leonard, without saying anything.

The young man made a few more passes in front of Fearless Sam's face, and said, in a commanding manner:

"Go up to Belle Howard's room, and tell her to dress and come out at once."

"The scoundrel!" thought the detective.

But he did as he was ordered. He turned around, and walked up the stairway to the main deck with a slow and stately step, such as he conceived to be the proper thing for a man in his supposed condition, and knocked at Belle Howard's door.

"Who's that?" asked Belle's voice, in startled tones.

Leonard Merville whispered in the detective's ear: "Fearless Sam." The detective repeated after him, but aloud: "Fearless Sam!"

"Good!" muttered Leonard, delighted at the success of his plan so far, and speaking without thinking.

"Good!" said the detective.

"What did you say?" asked Belle, from the inside.

"Get up, dress yourself and come out. I want to speak to you," whispered Leonard in Sam Wilson's ear, quickly, but distinctly.

The detective repeated the words exactly as they were given to him by Leonard, and the girl, without a thought of danger, cried: "All right. Wait a minute," as she hastily put on her raiment, preparatory to coming out into the corridor. She had no fear so long as it was Sam Wilson that called to her.

The detective took this opportunity of looking around him in the gloom of the corridor, and what he saw filled him with the pleasurable excitement that is so heartily enjoyed by the brave man when he sees a fight imminent and knows that he is in the right.

He saw Canada Jack and the Skeleton standing close to the wall at the end of the corridor, sheltered so much by a large coil of

rope hanging on a nail that they would never have been observed by any one who did not know of their presence.

Standing close behind Leonard Merville was Luke, who had come up with the detective and his companion, and who was ready to obey any orders that might be given him by the young man whom he served with such blind faithfulness.

"There will be fun here before long, but I can afford to wait for it," thought the detective, as he allowed his right hand, that was hanging at his side, to feel that the big revolver he always carried was safe in the pocket of his pea-jacket.

"What a deuce of a long time that girl is!" growled Leonard, impatiently, as he shifted from one foot to the other and looked to see that Luke was at his elbow.

The detective began to repeat the sentence, and had got as far as "What a deuce of a long time," when Merville clapped his hand over Fearless Sam's mouth, so that the mumbling of the sentence, which the detective was determined to complete, could not be distinguished by the girl in the state-room.

"Wha' does that mean, Mas'r Leonard?" asked Luke, whose woolly hair was almost coming out of curl in his superstitious awe of the proceedings, that he could not understand.

"It's all right, Luke. I have him mesmerized, that's all."

"Hi! Yes. I know. I done see a man do that business once in a show, but it was a fake."

"This is not a fake, Luke," observed Leonard, shortly.

"Isn't it?" thought the detective.

At this moment Belle Howard opened the door and came out.

The first person she saw was Merville, and with a startled cry, she half retreated into the state-room, when she saw Fearless Sam standing like a statue, looking at her.

She moved impulsively toward him, and then stopped, as she noticed that he was looking straight before him, with a funny expression she had never seen in his face before.

But just then the detective slowly closed his left eye and managed at the same time to throw a world of meaning into the other.

That was enough. Belle came forth and stood by the side of the detective, facing Merville, as in calm tones she asked:

"What do you want with me?"

CHAPTER XIII.

A QUEER VOYAGE.

HANDEL MONTGOMERY was sitting at the bow of the Parole enjoying a quiet pipe. He liked smoking, but could never get used to cigars. In England he had always used a very black meerschaum pipe, and it was this same pipe, almost strong enough to run the engine of the Parole, that he was pulling at as he sat, reflectively, on the capstan, thinking about his money and hoping it was safe.

"It seems to me that I'd be better off without the blooming coin altogether," he ejaculated between the whiffs of his pipe. "Ever since I've had it I've thought as every blooming cove was trying to get it away from me."

He puffed at his meerschaum silently for at least five minutes, but an intense reflective expression could have been seen on his face, had there been light enough for any one to see it, or had he been otherwise than alone on this dark early morning.

"Crikey!" he went on. "How tired I do get of this playing the concertina every day for a small salary, when I could buy up the whole blooming show if I wanted to. I shall be glad to get back to England and put on airs with the rest of the rich blokes over there. And I'll do it, too."

He smoked vigorously for a few minutes longer, lost in thought, and enjoying his tobacco to the fullest extent. It was Handel Montgomery's habit to take a quiet smoke on the deck in this way when the boat had got fairly under way at the last stand. He always said that he never enjoyed the flavor of tobacco so much as under these circumstances, and the complacent way in which he smoked seemed to bear out his assertion.

Suddenly something struck his ear that made him remove his pipe from his lips and pull his long red-whiskers as he listened intently.

A rippling of water that was not only that made by the progress of the Parole.

"There's no blooming mistake! I heard something, or I'm a Dutchman," muttered Handel.

Handel Montgomery was not a quick man, either in thinking or moving. Therefore, it took him at least a minute to get himself into such shape, mentally and physically, as would warrant his getting up to see what the mysterious ripple was.

He got up at last, however, and walked on tiptoe to the port side of the boat.

It was very dark, and at first he could not distinguish anything unusual. Then, as he strained his eyes, he uttered a low exclamation:

"By George!"

He crept along, under cover of the deck above him, that threw him into deep shadow, and by slow degrees, reached a spot about half-way

along the boat, where an opening in the bulwark was protected by a heavy wooden bar that could be raised or lowered on a hinge. A glance told Handel that the bar was raised, although an hour ago he had seen it dropped and fastened with an iron bolt.

"Some blooming game going on here," thought Handel Montgomery, as he crept along in the shadow and looked over the side of the boat at the black water, which broke into little splashes of white where it was caught under the keel and thrown up.

"Seems to me I can see something black in the water just under the taffrail. I wonder—Yes, by gracions! It is a boat! Well, they ain't going to leave Handel Montgomery out of this game. I am the wrong sort of cove to be caught that way."

The boat came from under the stern of the Parole, and Handel could see plainly enough now that it contained six persons, one of whom he felt sure was a woman.

"This is blooming interesting. Who is the woman, I wonder? It does not matter. I am going in, too!"

As he muttered these words the boat glided along until it was just below him. Without hesitation Handel dropped into it, on top of one of the two men who were rowing.

"Fore de Lawd, you've squashed me," came in a voice that Handel recognized at once as that of Luke.

"What—what is up?"

The Englishman was completely dumfounded by what he saw in the boat, and could not speak coherently in his astonishment.

Seated in the stern was the detective, looking straight before him, without saying a word, and keeping his left arm around the girl. His right was in the pocket of his pea-jacket, where, although Handel could not see it, it was holding a six-shooter with a firm grasp.

In the seat in front of them were Canada Jack and the Skeleton Dude, each with a revolver in his hand, which were pointed at the heads of Luke the negro and Leonard Merville, who were rowing.

Without understanding what it all meant, Handel took the vacant seat in the bow of the skiff, at the fierce order of Canada Jack, who appeared to be in command of the boat, for the detective was apparently in a daze and did not take any interest in the proceedings.

"Well, if this isn't the bloomingest lark I ever struck," observed the Englishman, as he looked from one to the other of the strange crew in the skiff.

"You infernal fool! Shut your mouth!" growled Merville, as he pulled away at his oar with the long, sweeping stroke of an old sailor, that sent the skiff flying along with the least possible expenditure of labor on the part of the oarsman. Besides being a trained athlete, Merville had had experience as a sailor, and rowing was child's play to him.

The Englishman pulled his red whiskers and glanced in the direction of Leonard as if he would have liked to fly at him, but a significant movement of Canada Jack's revolver warned him to remain quiet.

"Keep away from the steamer," was the brief order of Canada Jack, to the rowers, as he saw that their course hitherto was close under the lee of the Parole.

In the little light that was now cast upon the dark waters by the newly-risen new moon, Handel could see that Merville scowled, but the revolvers in the hands of Canada Jack and the Skeleton Dude, warned him that there would be no use in insubordination. Those pistols were liable to go off at any moment.

"Pull over to that headland about half a mile below, on the eastern shore."

For the first time since Handel had been on the boat he heard the voice of Fearless Sam.

The detective was sitting quietly by the side of Belle Howard, apparently taking little heed of what was going on, and leaving the management of the expedition, whatever it was, to Canada Jack. But the decided way in which he gave this order now indicated that he was not as deeply buried in his own reflections as one might have thought. In fact, he was keeping a wary eye upon all that was in progress, and was as alert as he always was, wherever he might be.

The girl by his side, wrapped in a shawl that was drawn over her head—for the night breezes on the river were chilly, although it was warm enough during the day—did not seem to be as frightened of Leonard Merville as usual. She had Fearless Sam by her side, and she felt that she could trust him to protect her, no matter what befell.

The oarsmen obeyed the detective's command, and the boat, suddenly changing its course, headed straight for a jutting piece of land that could just be discerned a long way ahead upon the port bow.

"What in the blooming nation are we going to do?" burst from Handel Montgomery, who found his curiosity overcoming his prudence.

"Shut up!" commanded Canada Jack.

"But I want to know where I am going," remonstrated the Englishman.

Fearless Sam here interposed:

"You were not asked to come, Handel, and now you are here, you must have patience, like the rest of us, and see what turns up. You are not afraid, are you?"

Before Handel Montgomery could indignantly declare that there was nothing under the sky that could frighten him, the piping voice of the Skeleton Dude struck in:

"Of course he is afraid. He thinks he is going to meet some Indians, who might scalp him and carry off his red whiskers for fuel."

"You skinny travesty on human nature!" spluttered Handel. "I'll—I'll—I'll—"

"Well, what will you do?" inquired the Skeleton, in mocking tones, as he balanced his pistol in his hand and looked very straight at the indignant concertina-player.

"Put down that gun, my blooming covey, and I'll make cat's-meat of you in half a jiffy! I'll—I'll—"

"Oh! I'll put down the gun! I ain't afraid of you, anyhow," retorted the Skeleton, half rising from his seat.

The detective placed his hand on the Skeleton's shoulder and made him sit down, although he did not use much more force than he would have exercised on an obstreperous rabbit. The Skeleton's pluck was altogether disproportionate to his strength.

"Shadow!" said the detective, sternly.

"Yes."

"You are under my orders now."

"I know it, but—"

"That's enough. You are to keep your pistol in your hand, ready for use on either Leonard Merville or Luke, if I give the word."

"I know. That's what you told us."

"Well, then, if you have any quarrel with Professor Montgomery, settle it at some other time. That is, if he lives beyond this night."

Montgomery shuddered at these words of the detective, but he did not allow any one to see that he was at all apprehensive. On the other hand, he was anxious to fight with the Skeleton Dude there and then, declaring that he would eat him alive, bones and all, if he ever got near him.

The detective looked over to the concertina-player and remarked, as politely as if he were stating some ordinary, common-place fact:

"Another word from you, Handel Montgomery, and I will throw you overboard with my own hands. You know me!"

Montgomery did know Fearless Sam, and shut up like a clam for the rest of the voyage on the skiff.

"Now, pull hard! It will be daylight before long, and I don't suppose any of us want to be surprised at our work when morning comes," continued the detective.

Whatever was the purpose of the trip on this boat, and however antagonistic some of the people in the skiff might be to others, it was evident that Leonard Merville was as anxious to get back to the Parole as soon as possible as was Fearless Sam.

The two long oars took on a quicker movement. Leonard was pulling "stroke," and set the pace for the negro to follow, and the way the skiff leaped through the water reminded Handel Montgomery of the rush of the 'Varsity' boats from Putney to Mortlake, on the old Thames, in the great yearly race, as he observed in a general way to whomsoever might be listening, as he sat in the bow and watched the water dashing away from the keel.

The Parole was still plodding steadily along, her engines at only half-speed, for there was plenty of time to reach the next stand before it would be necessary to commence building the tents, and there would be no sense in wasting coal.

The lights that hung about the steamer here and there were only oil lanterns, that gave forth a very feeble glimmer, and the boat stood forth, a great black mass, hardly lighted at all by the lanterns, or even the furnace fires, that glowed occasionally with a dull red as the firemen opened the doors to wood up.

Evidently no one on the Parole had noticed that the skiff had dropped away, and was following a little astern, with a speed almost as smooth, and beyond any reasonable, or unreasonable, manner of doubt, as great as that of the steamer's own.

"Here we are!" exclaimed the detective, at last. "Pull in!"

The skiff swung around in response to the movements of the oarsmen, and a few more strokes sent her rushing into a sloping, sandy bottom with such a suddenness that it threw Handel Montgomery off his seat, and nearly pitched him head-first into the water, to his unspeakable disgust.

"You are a clumsy man for a professional," cried the Skeleton, who had never forgiven the concertina-player for making fun of him on the first day the circus gave a show, and was always ready to rejoice in his discomfiture.

Handel recovered himself, and was coming along the boat full tilt to chastise the Skeleton, when the detective looked at him, and he changed his mind.

"Leonard and Luke, if you stir from your seats till I give you leave, I'll give you a bullet apiece," observed Fearless Sam, politely.

The detective evidently meant what he said, and the two prisoners, (for it was plain now that Leonard and Luke were such), sat still as Sam helped the girl out of the boat and led her a little way up the bank to where a bluff of rock prevented further progress.

"Stand here a moment, Belle. You are not afraid, are you?"

"Oh, no. I am never afraid so long as I know I have you near to protect me."

Fearless Sam smiled. Although he was not the man to care for compliments, there was something fascinating in the innocent confidence bestowed upon him by this helpless girl, and he liked it.

A sign to Handel, who was as completely under the influence of the detective as every one became when Sam chose to take the position of leader anywhere, and the concertina-player had jumped out of the skiff and was by his side.

"Stand by Miss Howard and take care of her for a moment."

"All right, my covey," responded Professor Montgomery, cheerfully.

"Got a weapon?"

"Only my dukes."

"Dukes?"

"These. My dukes, mauleys, bunch of fives, whatever you like to call them," answered Handel, holding up his fists.

"All right. You can use them, I suppose?"

"Try me. Just let me get a chance at that Skeleton, and I'll show you!"

"You need not use them on the Skeleton. There is no credit in punching a man that you could blow off his feet," was the dry response of the detective, as he turned away and went down to the boat.

In obedience to his sign, Merville got up and walked doggedly up the bank away from the boat, with Fearless Sam at his side, revolver in hand, while Canada Jack escorted Luke, and the Skeleton brought up the rear, as a sort of guard of honor.

Arrived at the bluff, the detective suddenly faced around to his captive, and said, sternly:

"Leonard Merville, open that door!"

With the howl of a hunted beast who finds himself at last in the hands of his enemies, Leonard turned to spring on the detective.

He stopped as the muzzle of a six-shooter was thrust in his face, while Fearless Sam remarked, quietly:

"Quit that, Leonard, or you'll get hurt!"

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW IT HAPPENED.

THE reader has doubtless been surprised to find Fearless Sam and his party in charge of the skiff that was obviously intended for the sole use of Merville.

It may, therefore, not be out of place to explain how the tables were turned so completely.

We left the detective standing outside the door of Belle Howard's state-room on the Parole, repeating words that were placed in his mouth by Merville.

The young man thought that he had Fearless Sam completely under the hypnotic influence, and that he could do anything he pleased with him. How much he was mistaken on the subject the reader knows.

Fearless Sam was a good actor, but he was not a hypnotic subject. His will power was too great for that.

He allowed Merville to believe that he was still under the influence while the young man directed him to bring Belle Howard down the stairs and along the lower deck to the stern, where, on the port side, just out of reach of the great wheel turning slowly at the back of the boat, and sending it on its way, was a large skiff, fastened by a rope and being towed along in the wake of the Parole.

Canada Jack and the Skeleton were very near to being discovered when the party commenced its march, for Leonard moved quickly, and the others had to do the same thing, at his command. He had whispered to the detective in the monotonous tone he used in his character of a hypnotist to walk as fast as he could, and the detective had obeyed by dragging the girl along the corridor at such a rate that she had almost fallen, but not without managing to whisper in her ear:

"Fear nothing. You are perfectly safe. Trust me!"

A slight pressure on his arm told the detective that the girl understood the situation, and he enjoyed the way he was fooling Merville so long as he knew the girl would not spoil things by making a disturbance.

The detective had formed a plan while pretending to be hypnotized, and was anxious to carry it out. He knew that he could depend upon Canada Jack, and even the Skeleton Dude was not to be despised, because, although he could not do much in an actual struggle that called for physical strength, he could aim a pistol as well as the next man, and was not afraid to do it.

Although the detective had appeared not to be noticing anything, he had kept his eyes open and had seen that his followers were not far away, and that they were watching his move-

ments, ready to spring to his assistance so soon as they should see that it was needed.

The strange procession went down the stairs to the lower deck, where Monarch was walking uneasily up and down in his cage, and perhaps thinking of the native forests where there would be fine game at this dark time of the morning.

Past the cages and other things that inumbered the deck, and past a dark hole where the bunks of the deck hands and tent men were, went the party.

Merville kept close at the side of the detective, and occasionally made a pass or two in front of Fearless Sam's face, as if to make sure of his still being under the influence, at which the detective could scarcely forbear laughing outright, and thus spoiling everything. At last they stood at the side of the Parole where the skiff could just be distinguished bobbing up and down on the dark waters.

"Whar we gwine, Mas'r Merville?" asked Luke, in a whisper.

"None of your business," was the courteous reply.

Then Merville seemed to think that it might be as well to let the negro know, so he added, in a more polite way:

"We are going to the bluff, to the crib I have just below here."

"Hi!" ejaculated the negro, with a peculiar intonation signifying that he was very much interested as well as astonished.

The detective pricked up his ears. This was important news to him, and might solve the problem that he had been working on ever since he had been traveling with the Parole.

The bluff he had heard of, but until now had no idea where it was situated. It might have been in any part of the United States for all he knew, and now the unguarded remark of Leonard Merville was likely to guide him direct to the spot! Decidedly, he would go with Merville on this strange voyage.

"Whar is the bluff?" asked Luke.

"Look along the river in the dark to a place about three-quarters of a mile down there, in the east shore," said Merville.

"It is so dark I can't see anything."

"Exactly. But if you could see you would find that there is a headland away out, and in that headland is the secreet entrance to the crib I am going to visit."

Luke looked around him, and glanced at Merville in a warning way.

The young man understood the glance, and shrugging his shoulders, he replied to the unuttered caution:

"That's all right. Fearless Sam is in a deep sleep, and as for Belle, she will have everything I own, including myself, so it does no harm to let her know where my treasures are kept."

"Well, I s'pose you know best."

"I suppose I do," returned Leonard Merville, coolly.

The two men had not been idle while talking. Leonard was pulling at the line that held the skiff, and now the negro jumped in and got the oars ready for business.

"Go into the skiff, Belle!" commanded Merville, politely enough, but in a tone that implied he was not to be trifled with.

She was still leaning on Sam's arm, and a slight pressure directed her to obey. She was quick at understanding hints, no matter how they might be given.

"Good!" muttered Leonard. "Obedience is what I want."

He assisted the girl to leap lightly into the boat, when Luke took her hand, and led her to a seat in the stern where a large rug had been spread to make the hard seat more comfortable.

"Now, Fearless!" whispered Leonard, waving his hands in front of the detective's face.

He expected to see the detective follow his command and step into the skiff, too. But, something slipped up in the combination.

There was a blinding flash in Merville's eyes as the detective struck him a well-directed blow in the cheek. The next instant he was on his back, with Fearless Sam kneeling on his chest.

Luke had been arranging the seat in the skiff for the girl, and had not seen the blow, but he understood at once, from the noise of the scuffle, that something was wrong, and, grasping the side of the Parole, was about to swing himself on deck, when a man jumped at him all in a heap, and he fell back into the skiff with his assailant on top of him.

"Golly! Dis hyar is nice!" exclaimed the negro, breathlessly, as he strove to free himself from the mighty clutch of the stranger.

"Keep still, you black rascal, or I'll choke you!" cried Canada Jack, for he it was who had so promptly come to the assistance of the detective.

Luke seemed to think that it would be of no use his trying to get free, so he lay still, while the detective, taking away from Merville the pistol he tried to draw, lifted him by the collar of his coat and dropped him into the skiff like a bag of flour.

"Come on, Shadow!" cried Sam. "Jump in, and if either of these rascals tries any monkey business, put a bullet in him."

"That's what I will," squeaked the Skeleton,

suddenly appearing from nowhere, as it seemed to the bewildered Merville and Luke, and dropping into the boat with his pistol ready in his hand.

"I'll make you fellows pay for this," hissed Leonard, with an evil scowl that showed he meant what he said.

"All right, Merville, but it is you that will have to do the paying first," returned the detective, cheerfully.

Fearless Sam was methodical in his movements now.

He went through the pockets of his prisoner, one by one, and took from him a bowie-knife, as well as the pistol. Then he commanded him, in a cold voice, to take his seat and seize an oar. Merville looked around him, to see what prospect there might be of escape from the predicament in which he so unexpectedly found himself. He decided that there was none, so he took the oar, as the detective commanded.

The Skeleton seated himself just in front of the young man, with his pistol ready for use, and an expression in his deeply-sunken eyes that boded ill for the prisoner should he attempt any hostile movement.

By this time Canada Jack had placed the negro beside his chief, with an oar in his hand, after taking from him the long knife that had once figured so painfully in a struggle between the negro and the white man who was now ordering him about.

When these arrangements were completed, the detective removed his large, broad-brimmed hat and used his silk handkerchief vigorously on his polished head. He had been under restraint for so long, pretending that he was under the hypnotic influence of Leonard Merville, that he felt the need of a little relaxation in the shape of a good, hearty rub of his head.

"Phew!" he cried. "Thet was one of the funniest things as I ever had anything ter do with. Leonard, what in thunder did you think you hed in me—a sucker?"

"Curse you! I'll get even yet," growled the young man, as he bent his dark eyes fiercely upon the innocent blue orbs of the detective, and clinched his fists in impotent rage.

Fearless Sam, still speaking in the Western dialect that was natural to him, although, as we have seen, he could throw it off at will, answered, with a child-like smile:

"I don't doubt your desire to even things with me, Leonard, but for the present you hav business on hand with that oar. So jest pull for that headland below thar, an' we'll see what is in that crib of yours, in a sociable sort of way."

The mocking tones of the detective maddened the young man, but he was powerless, although for the moment he determined to rebel by refusing to row.

A pistol pointed straight at his head, with a certain light in the blue eyes that indicated a determination to fire, if necessary, made him change his mind, and pulling methodically in the direction pointed out by Sam, the negro took his time from the "stroke," and the skiff moved swiftly along by the side of the Parole, keeping so close to her that Leonard Merville hardly had room for his oar part of the time, and was compelled to unship it occasionally to prevent its breaking against the side of the steamer. Prisoner as he was now, and rowing against his will, his professional pride as an oarsman would not permit him to break an oar by mere clumsiness, such as would have been implied had he not unshipped it at critical moments.

The detective was taking observations of the Parole, to make sure that this secret expedition, in which six people had become involved in such a remarkable way, was not being watched by any one on the steamer, when a sudden exclamation, followed by the tumbling into the boat of Handel Montgomery, made him sit straight up, and pretend to be lost in thought, as already described.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CRIB IN THE BLUFF.

WHEN Merville jumped at the detective, and was so promptly called down at the muzzle of the revolver, Luke, who had been watching for some sign from his chief that should regulate his own action, made a simultaneous attack on Canada Jack.

The grafter happened to be half turned from his prisoner at the moment, watching Handel Montgomery and the Skeleton pulling the skiff a little higher up the bank, so that it would not drift away.

This gave the negro a slight advantage, which he improved by throwing his heel behind that of Canada Jack, and overturning him.

The negro stooped to snatch the pistol from the hand of his fallen enemy, but, he was not quick enough, for the grafter suddenly gave Luke a kick in the shin that doubled him up and resulted in his being held by the collar in Canada Jack's left hand, while a pistol in his right was pressed against the negro's forehead, in less time than is occupied in telling it.

"Yo' is a thief, Canada Jack, an' I don't like thieves," growled Luke, as he nursed his chin.

"I don't like them either, Luke, and that's the reason I'm not stuck on you."

He then directed the concertina-player to keep his eye on Luke, while the Skeleton did

the same, as Fearless Sam led Merville to the bluff and repeated to him his command to open the way into the secret chamber that he now knew was in existence somewhere in the vicinity.

Merville looked around for some way of escape, but could see none.

"After all," he thought, "I intend to wipe this fellow out; he shall never get a chance to turn me over to the police even if he finds out anything, which I don't think he will."

The detective was watching him so closely by the light of the new moon that had now escaped entirely from the clouds and made everything dimly visible, that he seemed to be almost reading the exact thoughts of the young lion-tamer, but he did not utter a word as Merville walked up to the bluff, with Sam's revolver just behind his ear, and pointed to one spot in the rocky face of the bluff.

At a sign from the detective, Canada Jack proceeded to dig at the spot indicated by Merville, using his bowie-knife for the purpose.

As Fearless Sam had anticipated, the spot proved to be soft earth, although it looked like all the rest of the bluff, and would have been mistaken for rock, at a casual glance.

Canada Jack poked at the place, and then using his hands, pulled out the earth until he had made a hole big enough for a man's head.

"Hallo!" suddenly exclaimed Canada Jack.

"What's ther matter?" from Fearless Sam.

"I can feel something like a door-handle."

"Pull it!" directed Leonard Merville, briefly.

Canada Jack obeyed, and as he pulled at the knob, was surprised to find that a large section of the bluff was coming out.

In another moment a door, ingeniously covered with paint and a covering of loose earth fastened on with tar, was discovered open, and Canada Jack, with a shout of triumph, rushed in.

He came out immediately, however, with a cry of pain and rage.

Leonard Merville laughed.

"What's ther matter, Canada?" asked the detective.

"Durned if I know. I ran with my face into what seemed to be like a hornets' nest," answered the garter, ruefully.

He was holding his hands to his face, which, it could be seen, even in the dim light, was badly scratched in all directions.

"Little too quick, eh, Canada?" laughed Sam. "Well, I guess you are not badly hurt, are you?"

The detective had drawn his useful bull's-eye lantern from his pocket—a convenience he was never without after dark, having it so arranged that it could fold up, with the light inside, and fit into one of the pockets of his pea-jacket, without being in the way. He opened the slide, and allowed a strong flood of light to enter the black doorway that had been opened by Canada Jack.

He saw at once what had caused the pain to the garter—a heap of shrubbery of the cactus family, all points, and forming a formidable barrier to the entrance.

"How does this work, Leonard?" he asked, briefly.

"Shall I show you?"

"Yes."

The young man stepped into the cave and pulled at the shrubbery, while the detective kept his revolver carefully pointed at his ear.

"It seems to be stuck in some way," exclaimed Merville, after he had worked at the shrubbery for a minute or two. "It always comes out easily enough when the proper combination is worked, but it won't answer this time."

"Try again," the detective ordered.

Merville pulled and tugged, but without any particular result, the detective watching him suspiciously, and wondering whether there was anything wrong with this mysterious guard of the cave, or whether it was all a trick on the part of the young man to gain time.

"He's trying some monkey business with me, I feel sure," muttered the detective, "but it will not help him. At the first treacherous move I'll shoot him down like a dog."

The detective was looking at the girl by his side.

"Merville, I believe you can open that thing if you want ter," he said. "Now, I'll give you just one minute more, and if you hev any sense you won't tell me or show me and ther rest that you hev not done it by that time. If you hev not got it open then, I'll take you prisoner, as a detective in the employ of the State of Mississippi, where we are now, and hold you for abduction of this girl, Miss Belle Howard, and other crimes of which I can prove you guilty. You hear what I say, and you know that I don't fool over such matters."

The stern tones of the detective were enough to satisfy any one that he was in earnest, and Merville was so satisfied.

He looked around at the detective with a malignant expression, that was not lessened in the glare of the bull's-eye lantern, and said, doggedly:

"I am telling you the truth. I cannot open this thing by myself. It is a strong inner door, hidden by the cactuses, and it has got stuck in

some way. Let Luke help me. He has the combination, and he will know just how to do it."

Fearless Sam hesitated. He suspected treachery, but at the same time he did not see how he was to get into the crib unless he let Leonard open it in his own way.

"Luke," he called out.

The negro moved, with Handel still holding a revolver at his temple.

"Go in ther and help Leonard, but remember, both of you, that any trick will mean a bullet apiece."

Luke stepped into the opening by the side of Leonard, and seized a portion of the shrubbery, at which Leonard had been pulling.

"Now, Luke, both together!" exclaimed Leonard, as he gave the negro a warning nudge.

Luke, on the alert, pulled at the shrubbery, while watching closely to take his cue from Leonard whenever it should be given.

"Wal, Leonard, ther minute is nearly up," remarked the detective, in a warning tone.

"Is it?" yelled Leonard, as with a pull at the cactus as if he would tear the whole shrub out of the earth, he fell back against the open outer door.

At the same moment the negro dropped upon his knees; then the outer door shut with a bang, just as two pistol-shots rang out in the still morning air.

"Come, boys! Go fer ther door!" yelled Fearless Sam.

Canada Jack thrust his hand into the hole and pulled at the knob, but without effect. The door was immovable!

"Curse those fellows! They have disconnected the handle, I suppose," exclaimed Canada, ruefully. "By ginger, they're too slick for us. I hate to be done by a nigger, too! I don't mind so much for the white, but that coffee-colored coon oughtn't to be able to do up an old garter like me!"

Jack was evidently so deeply grieved at the thought of being outwitted that Fearless Sam was obliged to laugh, mad as he was at Merville's escape just as it seemed as if the mystery of the Pittsburg bank robbery was about to be cleared up.

"Never mind, Canada! There's plenty of slick niggers in ther world, an' you ain't ther first white man they hev done up. You go an' play policy, an' you'll find that niggers are just as slick at that as you are with your three little shells and your one little pea."

This badinage did not lessen Jack's wrath, and he tugged at the knob in the small hole with all his might.

But in vain. It was evident that the occupants of the cave possessed some means of disconnecting the knob with the machinery that opened the door, and that they had done so now.

"Give it another whirl, Canada. Perhaps it has caught in something, like the inside door," suggested the detective.

Canada Jack seized the knob once more in his right hand, and putting his right foot against the bluff, to give him a good purchase, he braced himself, and tugged at the knob with all his might.

The result was rather unexpected.

At the first tug, the knob came away in his hand, and the unlucky garter turned a somerset, bringing up so near the water's edge that his feet actually flopped into the river.

The detective burst into a joyous laugh, that was echoed by all his companions, even Belle Howard joining in, worried as she was by her fear of harm from Merville.

"Well done, Canada! I don't believe that er tumbler with ther show as could hev beaten that," exclaimed Sam. "You did as pretty a triple somerset that time as I hev ever seen in all my experience in ther circus business. Let's see you do it again."

But Jack was too mad to reply. He picked himself up, and stepping up to the bluff, gave it a kick that probably made his toes ache, but that eased his mind, for he turned away and walked down to the skiff with an almost placid expression on his face.

"Coming?" he queried, briefly.

"You think it is no good our trying ter git inter this place now, eh?" asked Fearless Sam.

"Sure of it."

"Guess you're right."

"Sure I am!"

The garter spoke in such a confident tone that it seemed as if he must have possessed some private information. But he did not. He simply spoke from an inborn conviction founded on his experience with the recalcitrant handle of the cave, and that he was now holding in his hand, with a piece of very stout wire attached, intending to keep it for the rest of his life as a memento of the occasion when, as he said, "a coon did him up."

It was a rather discomfited party that reached the Parole just before day, light, and got aboard from the skiff without being seen by any one, but Fearless Sam and Belle Howard were both consoled to some extent.

Belle was relieved because she thought she had

seen the last of Merville, and would not be persecuted by his hateful attentions any more, and the detective felt satisfied that he had at last found out not only the man who had robbed the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg, but had also discovered the hiding-place of the swag.

Ten minutes after the skiff had discharged its passengers on the Parole, every one of the party was in bed trying to recuperate after the fatiguing and exciting events of the night.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN A LIVING TOMB.

WHEN Merville and Luke managed to close the outer door of the cave in the face of their enemies, it was with no other idea than to prevent them getting in and learning secrets that were not for them.

Luke had not known anything about the combination, because Leonard was not the man to trust an important secret to any one, but when the young man had said that he did know it, and had suggested that he come and help, the negro understood it was a scheme of his "mas'r," and obeyed unquestioningly.

No sooner was the outer door closed with a bang than Leonard tore away a connecting wire that would allow it to be opened again by the knob outside. Then he sunk upon the ground in a corner to get his breath, while a sardonic smile played around his lips, as he listened to the talk outside. The cave was so arranged that every word spoken outside was plainly audible within, while nothing said inside could be heard without.

"Canada Jack is mad at you, Luke," he observed, quietly. "Do you hear him?"

"Yes, and fore de Lawd, I'll kill him, some day," replied the negro.

"But wha' we gwine to do, Mas'r Leonard?" continued. "They can't git in here, can they?"

"No. I'll give them everything I have if they can break open that door now that I have disconnected the handle and wire," replied the young man with a grin.

A flood of light now came as Leonard struck a match, and lighted a railroad lantern that was concealed there for a purpose.

"Now, Luke, help me get this stuff out of the way."

It was the work of but a minute to remove the cactus barrier. A sudden tug brought away the whole heap, revealing a rough door, fastened by an ordinary lock.

Drawing a key from his pocket, the young man opened this door, and lantern in hand, with Luke at his heels, he went into the inner recesses of the cave and closed the door after him.

It was a mere hollow in the side of the hill, made there perhaps by the Indians, centuries ago, and fitted with a modern door by some of the river pirates, who saw that it would make a good hiding-place for booty and for themselves when the law pressed too heavily.

Leonard hung his lantern on a nail on the wall, and went over to a large iron-bound box that stood in one corner of the apartment.

It was fastened by a combination lock, like that of an ordinary bank safe, and when he opened the lid, it was revealed that the box was really of thick iron, covered with wood, and then iron-clamped again.

In the box was another box that nearly filled it, and that was fastened down by screws driven through the bottom into the outer receptacle. To open this Leonard took a small key that hung around his neck, under his clothing, by a silken cord.

As the inner box was opened a large quantity of gold coin, a heap of jewelry of all kinds, including many unset diamonds, and several bundles of greenbacks were revealed.

The negro's eyes glistened.

"All yours, Mas'r Leonard?"

"No. This belongs to the gang. I am merely the treasurer."

"Golly! I should like to be treasurer."

"It would not help you any," was Leonard's dry response. "Even if I were to try to take this stuff, I couldn't get away with it. The gang is too smart for that. I am watched all the time, and it is only my share of it that I can handle, and that only at the regular division time, worse luck!"

Leonard was talking more to himself than to his companion, as he took some of the unset diamonds in his hand and allowed them to run through his fingers in a stream of sparkling, ever-changing light.

He was thinking of what should be his next move. Just as he thought he had everything in his own hands, it was too bad that his plans should have miscarried because he had miscalculated on the detective. He had intended to come to the cave, make prisoners of Belle, the detective and Canada Jack, and then return for the rest of the "swag," whatever it was.

"Well, Luke, empty your pockets," he said at length, with a sigh of disgust.

The negro now took from his blouse that he wore under his pea-jacket several packages of greenbacks, squeezed into the smallest possible space, for convenience of carrying, and handed them to Leonard.

"One, two, three, four, five, of five thousand dollars each. That's right, my boy," observed the young man, as he took the packages from the negro and deposited them in the box. "That's half of it. I shall have to get the other half when I can."

Luke did not reply, and Leonard closed the two boxes, turned the combination, and sat down on the box, as if tired of being bothered.

"Where does the circus show to-day, Luke?"

"About five miles below this."

"All right. Now we had better get some sleep. We are both about played out."

"Deed we are, Mas'r Leonard."

The negro threw himself on the earth floor, and curling himself up like a huge dog, was asleep in a few minutes.

Merville was apparently not so disposed to sleep as he had said, for he got up and walked up and down the cave for at least half an hour in deep thought, before he, too, threw himself down and allowed the schemes that had occupied his waking thoughts to be carried on in his dreams.

Neither moved for a long, long time. There was good ventilation in the cave, although where it came from could not be discerned by the casual observer, and the sleep of the two men who were willing to be murderers, and who had confessed themselves thieves, was as peaceful as that of children.

At last, Leonard stirred a little, and then, with a sudden movement, sat up, broad awake. He could not tell what had disturbed him. The negro was snoring in regular cadence, and was evidently good for many hours of sleep yet, if he were let alone.

Before lying down Leonard had put out the light in the lantern, and the cave was quite dark, save for a streak of daylight that came from a crevice high up in the wall, and that suggested the manner in which the cave was ventilated.

"Strange!" muttered the young man. "It seems as if I must have heard something, or I would not have woken up in this way."

He got on his feet, and put his hand instinctively to his hip-pocket, and then snatched it away with an exclamation of rage.

"I forgot! That infernal Sam Wilson took my revolver. Well, I have another in the chest there, if I should happen to need it."

He felt his way to the wall, where he knew the lantern hung, and took it down, while he fumbled in his pocket for a match.

He had the match in his fingers, and was just about to draw it along the leg of his trowsers, when—some one seized him by the collar, and with a muffled cry of "Villain!" forced him against the wall so firmly that, for the moment, he could not free himself.

But, only for a moment, for, with a wrench he had torn himself loose from the clutch of his unknown assailant, and then threw himself forward with all his force, to find himself locked in the deadly embrace of a foe almost as strong as himself.

For a moment the two wrestled and tugged with a mighty power, breathing heavily with their exertions. Then some one else took a hand in the proceedings, in the person of Luke, who, rudely awakened by the noise, sprung to his feet and immediately fell over the lantern that had dropped from the hand of Merville at the first onslaught.

Luke opined that nothing could be done in the dark; so, while the racket that he did not understand was going on, at his side, he philosophically lighted the lantern.

No sooner was light cast over the interior of the cave than he uttered an exclamation of surprise, simultaneous with a bowl of rage from Leonard.

The man locked in the arms of Merville, who was trying his best to get at the young man's throat, was none other than—Dale Graham!

"You rascal!" gasped Graham. "Where is she?"

The two men were holding each other in a grasp of iron, and their faces were within a few inches of each other.

Merville favored his rival with a mocking grin.

"Belle Howard? What do I know about her? I thought you were the favored one. She won't look at me, you know."

"Liar!" howled Graham, as he tried to force his foe back to the floor.

Luke, having hung the lantern on the nail, thought it time to interfere; so stepped behind Graham, and putting one of his long, sinewy arms around the young man's neck, he pulled him back, and taken by surprise, Graham was perfectly helpless in the hands of the negro.

Leonard, as soon as he found himself free, shook himself, and, with a sardonic smile, observed:

"You see, Luke, a fellow never knows when he is safe. I never thought about that door at the other end of the cave. It has not been used for ten years, and I thought it was covered over with earth so that it could not be seen or discovered. However, now that Mr. Graham has chosen to thrust himself upon our society, I guess we will proceed to make him welcome."

"All right," answered Luke. "But, we'd

better hurry up, for he's kicking like a two-year-old colt."

Leonard went to one corner of the cave, and from a small box took a pair of handcuffs.

Dale Graham started.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded, as he vainly tried to escape from the grasp of the negro.

"You'll see, Mr. Graham," returned Leonard, coolly, as he snapped the handcuffs on Graham's wrists with the ease of a professional, and then made a sign to Luke to stand aside.

Behind the negro, where they had not been noticed by him, were a pair of heavy iron shackles, fastened by a chain to the rocky wall. The chain was long enough to allow any one fastened in the shackles to sit or lie down, but within a small radius.

Dale Graham saw the shackles and understood the purpose of Leonard Merville even before that gentleman seized him and dragged him over to the wall.

"You villain!" cried Dale.

Leonard Merville replied with a sneering laugh, as he dexterously snapped the shackles around the other's ankles, thus making him a complete prisoner.

"Come, Luke," said Leonard, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"All right, Mas'r Leonard."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Dale. "Not leave me here?"

The only answer was a laugh from the two rascals, as they went hastily out of a rear door, by means of which Dale Graham had found his way in, shutting it after them with a bang, and fastening it with a rusty bolt on the outside, that had hitherto been concealed by a pile of loose earth.

Dale Graham was a prisoner alone in a cave, where he might starve to death, for anything he could do to help himself.

CHAPTER XVII.

"I AM HERE!"

THE Parole was drawn up to the bank of a small town a few miles below the secret cave.

It was the morning after the adventures of the detective and his companions with Leonard Merville and Luke, but there was nothing in the manner of Sam Wilson or any of those that had been with him to indicate that they had passed through such an exciting series of experiences as have just been detailed.

Sam Wilson had been busy all the morning making the presence of the circus known in the town, and the performers were all ready for the afternoon performance, when Old Tom Elliott rushed excitedly into the dressing tent to inquire for Leonard Merville and Dale Graham.

"Where are they two fellows?" he howled. "I don't want to give a show with half my people, and I depended upon Leonard for a bare-back principal act for the second turn. I'll fine him twenty-five dollars if he does not come to time. We shall be ready to start in half an hour, and if Merville is not ready then I shall have to fix over the programme again, and put something in for his act. I don't know how I am to do that without spoiling the whole show; I haven't got too many performers at the best, and I can't make people do too much, especially for the afternoon, or they'll be all played out for the evening."

Old Tom delivered this long sermon in a loud voice, and raged around the tent like one of the wild beasts of his menagerie let loose. He talked to everybody in general, and to Sam Wilson in particular, being accustomed to rely upon the detective when anything went wrong.

Fearless Sam was sitting on a trunk, smoking a cigarette, that he had rolled while listening to the peroration of the governor. Now he puffed a thin wreath of blue smoke from beneath his blonde mustache, and smiled as Old Tom paused for want of breath.

"I don't think Leonard Merville will be here this afternoon," he observed, quietly.

"Wha-a-a-at!" yelled Old Tom, with blazing eyes.

"I don't think he will be here this afternoon," repeated Sam, sending out another puff of smoke.

Old Tom gasped, and tried to speak, but his indignation was too great, and he could only stare and grunt.

"I'll do a concertina turn on horseback, if you like," here put in Professor Handel Montgomery, stroking his long, red whiskers, and looking at the manager with a propitiatory smile. "I believe I could stick on, with a good wide pad, or even bare-back, if you put plenty of chalk on the horse."

"Idiot!" growled Old Tom, sotto voice.

"I beg your pardon," cried Handel. "I didn't catch it. Do you want me to do the act?"

"No!" roared the irate manager. "I don't want to turn my big tent into a monkey show."

Handel Montgomery went to a trunk and sat down, with an indignant expression of countenance, and sought consolation for the affront in thinking of the money he had in his trunk, and the use he would make of it when he got back to the "old country."

"Now, Fearless, what am I to do?" resumed Old Tom, scratching his head in his perplexity.

"Wal, I hardly know," returned Fearless Sam.

"You see, Leonard Merville—"

"Is here!" broke in a ringing voice, and Merville, cool, smiling and *debonair*, stepped into the circle, and looked around him with satisfaction over the sensation he had caused.

Sam was surprised at the audacity of the young athlete, but he was too old a stager to show his astonishment. He removed his wide hat and polished his bald head with his silk handkerchief, but that was the only indication of his agitation that he allowed himself, and that was not enough to provoke comment.

The detective looked around, and was not at all taken aback when he saw Luke, the negro, moving about, as naturally as ever, doing the odd jobs that came within his range of duties with the show.

"More cheek than I gave him credit for," thought the detective, "but it will not make any difference. I know where the crib is now, and I'm going to take possession as soon as I'm ready. He'll want to sneak back there before long, and when he does, I'll go back with him."

"Where have you been, Leonard?" demanded Old Tom, in a pleasant enough tone, for he was so glad to see the young man back that he was not in the humor to quarrel with him now.

"Oh, I had a little business with a friend of mine near here, and I left the boat as soon as we pulled in here and took a walk to see him, knowing I should be back in time for the show. I should like to have got off this afternoon and evening, if it were possible."

"Utterly impossib'e, Leonard! You know that!" returned the manager, quickly. "We are short of people as it is, and I depend upon you and Belle Howard to carry the show. Dale Graham told me last night he was sick, and as he has not shown up this morning, I suppose he is in his bunk. I will go and look after him as soon as this afternoon show is going good."

Fearless Sam raised his eyebrows as he heard the manager talk about Dale Graham.

"I'll hev ter see inter this," he muttered. "If that boy hez come to any harm through Leonard Merville, then that's going to be a private circus hyar, as sure as my name is Sam Wilson."

The show went on all right that afternoon, with Leonard Merville and Belle Howard doing their double leap-for-life on the flying trapeze, and with both of them in their bare-back riding acts. They were the strong features of the show, and the multitude applauded them to the echo.

But where was the detective?

Fearless Sam had gone straight to the side-show in which Tim Koffey, arrayed in his professional costume as the Skeleton Dude, had just finished entertaining an audience, and was waiting for another to come in. He came down from his platform at once as soon as he saw the detective, and waited for him to speak.

"See hyar, Shadow. Thar's something in ther wind with that thar devilish Leonard Merville, and I'm going to find out what it is. I want you to be ready to go with me as soon as you get through to-night, to that crib we went to last night. I'm certain that Leonard and ther nigger are going there, and I mean to follow them and bring this thing to a close."

"All right. I'm with you," squeaked the Skeleton. "Who else will you take along?"

"Canada Jack."

"And Handel? I owe him one, and if there is any discomfort in this adventure, as I suppose there will be, I want him to have his share of it."

"Thet's a very Christian feeling, Shadow," laughed the detective. "However, if you like, I have no objection to his going. He will fight, if necessary, and then his red whiskers will light up the gloom."

The detective walked away, and Shadow glanced malignantly to the other end of the tent, where Handel Montgomery was examining his concertina and playing snatches of melody, as he generally was when he was not counting his money or performing before an audience.

"He has made fun of me several times, and I'm bound to get even with him," muttered the Skeleton Dude. "I'd have done it last night but for Sam, and I'm just waiting for my chance now."

He walked past the red-whiskered concertina-player, who only vouchsafed him a patronizing smile, that made the peppery Skeleton fairly sizzle within. The concertina-player took the utmost delight in teasing Mr. Koffey, although he did not like the Skeleton to turn the tables on him, as we have already seen.

The detective walked around the grounds, and, as he expected, discovered Canada Jack behind the animal-cages, entertaining a select audience with his shell game.

He closed business at once as soon as he saw the detective, with a brief: "Will open up again in the course of an hour," and walked away with Fearless Sam.

"Well, Sam, what's in the wind? Anything new?"

"Yes, I'm going to ther crib as soon as ther night show is about over, and I want you to go along. He ready for trouble."

"I always am," was the brief response.

"Good! We may meet some to-night. I'm going to find out what is in that thar cave ter night, ef it takes er leg."

"All right. I'll be ready!"

"Well heeled!"

"Well heeled!" repeated Jack.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DALE IN QUEER QUARTERS.

WHEN Merville and Luke shut the door of the cave and left Dale Graham a prisoner there, the prospects did not look very bright for the young man.

He was anything but a coward, but his situation was one in which he might be forgiven for feeling some dismay.

He did not know how long Leonard and the negro might remain away, or whether it was their intention to starve him or put him to death in some quicker way. He had no doubt that they would put him out of the world in some manner. It was simply a question of method.

He was the rival of Leonard Merville in the affections of Belle Howard, and, what made it worse for him now, Belle favored Dale's suit, and would not accept that of Leonard.

Dale thought of all these things, and he determined that if anything was to be done for him, he must do it himself.

The prospects were not very hopeful.

He was fastened by the legs to the shackles that held him in a very confined space, and his hands were held together with steel handcuffs. He was as helpless as a trussed turkey.

"But I am not caught yet, Leonard Merville!" he muttered. "I have my wits about me and I think I shall find some means to settle our long score yet. For Belle's sake, as well as my own, I'll try."

He dropped upon the floor and mused deeply upon his situation, in the hope of finding some way out of it.

"If I only had my hands free, it would not be so bad," he said, half aloud. "Well, why not?"

He held up his hands and shook the handcuffs as he thought.

"By heavens! This one on the right hand is not so very tight. I wonder—"

Whatever he wondered he did not finish in words. But he twisted his wrists so that the steel band on the right hand was braced against the inside of that on his left, and pulled with all his might, while he compressed all the fingers of his right hand into as small a space as possible.

"I never had a handcuff on before, but it seems to me as if my wrist does not fill the space. I believe I can slip it over my hand."

Even as he spoke he felt the steel slipping over his knuckles, and the next minute he uttered a cry of triumph as one of the steel bracelets dangled from the other on his left hand.

He pulled away at the one on his left hand, but, although it gave way a little, and he felt convinced he could get it off in course of time, he did not think it worth while to trouble about it now. It would not hurt him to let the two handcuffs dangle from his left wrist, and he wanted to use all the time and strength he had in getting out of the cave.

He took a match from his pocket and lighted it. Then he found he could just reach the lantern that Leonard Merville had left in the cave. When this was alight Dale had a better chance to operate, and it was with considerable joy that he found that his shackles were old-fashioned arrangements that had probably been used in old times for guarding refractory slaves, and that he could easily open them with his pocket-knife which was, fortunately, large and strong.

In less than an hour from the time that Merville and Luke had left the cave Dale Graham was free from his leg-irons and was confined only by one hand by the handcuffs.

"Before I go out I'll explore this place a little," he said to himself, with a smile. "I have no doubt that I can find my way out of the cave easily enough when I want to go."

To make sure that he could do so, however, Dale went to the front door, by which Leonard and Luke had entered and which they had shut in the face of Fearless Sam and his companions, and with one or two shoves, after drawing back an inside bolt, he found himself outside, looking at the Mississippi River, flowing past and glittering in the sun in all the beauty of a bright spring day.

Returning to the cave, but leaving the door open, so that he had the benefit of the daylight, the young man tackled the iron-bound box in the corner. It was too securely fastened, however, and as he did not know the combination, he gave it up after a while, with the inward determination to come back later with Fearless Sam.

Dale Graham seated himself on the ground just outside the cave, and gave himself up to thought. Then it struck him that he was hungry and he looked around to see what chance there might be to get something to eat.

"I shall not go to the show at all to-day. If I do, Old Tom will make me go into the ring, and I am not in the humor for it just now. I'll just take a day off."

The place he was in was far from human habitation, and the prospects for finding any house in which he might be fed were not bright.

"I believe I am in about the wildest part of this country," was Dale Graham's reflection, when he had walked a mile or so back from the river, in the hope of finding some farm-house, where he could be supplied with some hoe cake and milk, or some other homely fare such as is always to be found in Southern farm-houses, where the hospitality of Dixie is proverbial.

He walked on for some distance, and then found himself in swampy ground, into which his feet sunk at every step. Then he saw a forest a short distance away, and, impelled by a curious feeling that he could not understand, but that he was equally unable to resist, he walked on and plunged into the thicket.

"I don't know what is the reason, but it seems as if I must go on and see what is in that wood. I am very hungry, and something seems to tell me that I shall get something to eat there. In my present half-starved condition I cannot afford to fool with my chances of obtaining a square meal."

The young man felt in his hip pocket to make sure that he had a six-shooter close to his hand, and then thinking it might be better to have it in the outer pocket of his sack coat, so that he could get at it more readily, shifted it to that position and at the same time made sure that there were six good cartridges in it.

"You can't tell what you will meet in a strange part of the country," was his sage reflection, and it was not so long before he was glad that he had taken the precaution of having his weapon in a most convenient place.

As he brushed aside the tall sycamores and the thick sumachs on his way into the wood he could not prevent a feeling of superstitious awe creeping over him.

"They say there are all sorts of strange things in these swampy woods," thought Dale, "but the main thing I am afraid of is snakes. I shouldn't like a healthy rattler to tackle me here, by myself, but by heavens this is the sort of place where you are likely to meet beasts of that kind. If I do meet a rattlesnake I do not know what I shall do. It would be no use to blaze away at him with a revolver. I could not hit him once in ten shots, and he would have finished me long before I could give him six."

He pushed his way further into the wood, however, in spite of his apprehensions as to snakes. The ground was very soft in some places, while in others it was firm and covered with dense underbush. In either case it was hard to get through, and Graham began to think that he was going through a great deal of hard labor on the very slim chance of getting something to eat eventually.

"I would not keep this up merely for grub," he grumbled to himself. "But, somehow, I feel that I shall find something that will pay me for all my trouble."

As he thus soliloquized he caught sight of a spiral wreath of blue smoke rising above the trees straight up into the still air, and he felt a thrill run through him as he realized that he must be near some human habitation.

"Who the deuce lives in the recesses of this wild place, I wonder? Whoever it is I will interview them, and try to get a square meal, for I am pretty well played out. In any case, it will be something to remember and to tell yarns about when I get back to New York—if I ever do get back."

The young man was full of the spirit of adventure, as the reader will see, but he was very doubtful about the sort of place he was going to find himself in.

He walked for some distance further before he found the source of the smoke that was so plainly apparent above the trees.

"I wonder if it is some ghostly fire," he thought. "I have heard of fires being built by mysterious hands that disappeared when a human being went near them, leaving nothing behind but a strong smell of brimstone. I hope that this is not one of that sort of fires."

Even as he thus reflected he laughed at his own superstitious apprehensions, and pushed on more earnestly to find the fire, whatever it might be.

The trees were so close that the daylight had become mere gloom, and he could not see to make his way without considerable difficulty.

At last he caught sight of a structure of logs, plastered with mud, such as the negroes as well as poor whites use for habitations in localities where it is impossible to get well-built houses without considerable expense.

"I should like to know who is in that shanty before I tackle it," observed Dale. "But I am too hungry to spend any time in trying to make out who the host is in there, provided he will give me something to eat. I shall go right in and see."

But though Dale talked to himself thus determinedly, he did not plunge into the unknown without reconnoitering.

He made a circuit of the mysterious log hut, from which a column of smoke ascended from the center of the roof, and in which there was no

other sign of life, so far as could be seen from the exterior.

There was one small window, but it was high up in the wall, and was covered with dirty mosquito netting, so that nothing could be seen of the inside through it. The door was a heavy boarded affair of rough-hewn planks, tightly closed, and there was but the one.

Dale walked around the shanty, gradually coming nearer, until at last he stood in front of the heavy door. He rapped with his knuckles, but there was no response, so he gave it two or three hard cracks with the butt of his six-shooter.

A hoarse cry from within he interpreted as an invitation to enter. So returning his revolver to his coat pocket, but taking care that it was ready for instant use, he pulled the piece of dirty string that hung through a hole in the door and forced the door back.

A puff of smoke drove him back for an instant, but as it thinned a little, he plunged into the dark interior of the hut.

At first he could not see anything but a dim fire burning in the middle of the place, revealing itself in a spot of dark red. But, as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he discerned a bundle of something dark that eventually disclosed itself as an old negro woman, bending over the fire and crooning to herself in a low tone.

Standing behind the old woman, and gazing at him curiously, was a stout wench, very black, but wearing a good-natured expression, that showed a row of white teeth in a half smile.

"What yo' want?" queried the old woman, stopping her crooning long enough to ask the question, and resuming it at once.

"Grub!" was Dale Graham's laconic answer.

"'Deed, then, honey, we ain't got much."

"I don't want much."

"Well, we give you what we hez," said the old woman. Then, addressing the girl: "Yo' Chloe, don't be shif'less. Git de gemman some ob dem co'n cakes, an' tote 'em 'roun' right lively, too. Yo' hyar me?".

"Yes, mammy," answered the girl, as she set about the preparations with a smile at Dale that broadened into a grin.

The old woman took no further notice of her visitor, but resumed her crooning over the fire, while the girl lighted a candle, and then got the supper. She was handy, as most Southern negro wenches are, and in less than an hour Dale was sitting in front of a very appetizing meal of corn cakes, fried pork and steaming coffee, at a rickety old table, in the corner of the cabin, and perfectly contented with his surroundings.

He finished his meal after awhile, and then, as he lighted a cigar he was lucky enough to find in his pocket, he was startled by a vivid flash of lightning followed by a deafening peal of thunder.

"Halloo! That's pleasant!" he muttered.

As he uttered the words, it seemed as if the floodgates of heaven were opened, for the rain came down as if it had been emptied out of an ocean altogether, and the storm such as occasionally visits the Mississippi valley, beat about the hut as if it would wash it away, while the forked lightning and roaring thunder made up a combination of natural terrors such as he had never experienced in his life, especially amid such weird surroundings.

"It must be pretty late," he thought. "And this means that I'll have to stay here till morning. Well, I might do worse. It is comforting to have any shelter at all in such a storm, and besides, I am interested in the old lady. And, by the way, how she is enjoying that old corn-cob pipe!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VOODOO DANCE.

IT WAS nearly midnight when two men might have been seen plodding through the forest in the direction of the old woman's log house, taking advantage of each flash of lightning to see their way a little further toward their destination.

The two men were Merville and Luke, the negro!"

Both men seemed to know their way, and although they spoke but little to each other, they walked on with one accord, as if each knew the thoughts of the other.

The rain, that had been coming down with fury for several hours, had slackened, but the thunder and lightning were as fierce as ever, and the sky was black with clouds.

"There it is, Mas'r Leonard," said Luke, at last.

"Where?"

"Just ahead of us. Don't yer see, near that old burned stump over there, under the sycamore."

"You're right, Luke. Let's go right in."

"All right, Mas'r Leonard."

"Wonder whether any of the gang will be there. This is the time they ought to be around," muttered Leonard.

The negro could not distinguish his compan-

ion's words, but that did not trouble him. He had blind confidence in Leonard Merville, and was prepared to follow him anywhere and to do anything that was asked of him without question.

The young man exercised a power over the negro that was as complete as it was mysterious.

Boldly the young man strode forward, just as a vivid flash of lightning revealed the rough pine door of the negro woman's log-hut.

He knocked at the door, and without waiting for a response, entered, closely followed by Luke.

"Yo' come?" asked the old woman's voice, although the room was so dark and filled with smoke that Leonard could not tell where the owner of the voice was.

"Yes. I've come. Who's here?"

"The spirits."

"Oh, quit your jargon, and give me a sensible answer," returned Leonard, impatiently. "You don't suppose I believe in your nonsense, do you? Save it for the darkies and tell me whether the gang are here at once."

As he spoke, Merville marched further into the room, and almost fell over the old woman, who was crooning over her small fire, much as she had been hours before, when Dale broke in upon her.

A flash of blue lightning forced itself through the chinks of the cabin, and as the crash of thunder came almost simultaneously, Leonard burst into a sardonic laugh as he saw Luke by his side, trembling from head to foot, and looking at him with an expression of intense fear.

The young man distinguished several dusky figures enveloped in the smoke that came from the fire of damp wood, but he could not tell what their faces were like save that they were of varying shades of blackness, set off by eyes rolling in a great deal of white.

"Dis hyar de voodoo night, Mas'r Leonard," whispered Luke, crouching close to the young man, and speaking in an awe-stricken whisper.

"Wha' yo' say?" suddenly shrieked the old woman, as she rose from her stool by the side of the fire and stretched her skinny right arm in the direction of the shivering Luke.

Luke sunk to the earth on his knees, with his teeth chattering like castanets, as the old woman went on, in a horrible high treble:

"Yo' or'nary nigger! Yo' gwine ter come hyar an' talk 'bout de voodoo! Wha' yo' mean? 'Deed I curse yo' ef yo' done say 'nother word like that. De voodoo make yo' teeth drop out, yo' hair burn up, yo' eyes go blind, yo' nail-eat into de flesh, an' yo' inside shrivel up! Yo' hear me!"

The voice of the hag gradually rose till it became a shriek, and she spread out her fingers as she waved her hand over the unlucky Luke till they seemed to him like claws that would pluck out his heart.

He dropped upon the floor and groveled with his face buried in the dirt that formed the floor of the hut.

The old woman turned away from him with a gesture of disgust and dropped upon her stool, where she resumed her crooning as if she had never stopped it.

Merville tossed his head in contempt of the whole proceeding, and stretched out his hand as if he would give the old woman a shake, when she suddenly started up, and glared at him with her skinny arms extended toward him, and a dangerous gleam burning in her bleary eyes.

"Sit down, yo' Leonard Merville, an' I show you something! Yo' laugh at de voodoo. But, de voodoo is what yo' want to keep yo' from de gallows! Yo' hear me!"

There was something in the hag's manner that impressed Leonard, in spite of himself, and he dropped upon an old chair against the wall, with Luke sitting upon the floor, a demoralized heap, by his side.

The storm continued, and now the rain added to the uproar created by the thunder that roared in company with the flashes of blue and yellow forked lightning that showed themselves through every chink and cranny of the crazy old hut.

It was a fitting night for incantations!

Evidently the old woman thought so, for she laughed with demoniacal glee as she thrust her sleeve up from her skinny arms, and called to Chloe to give her the "yarbs."

The young woman who had served Dale Graham, with his supper came out of the gloom and handed the old woman something in an old rag, and immediately retired into the shadows on the other side of the cabin again.

The fire had burned low, and the old woman was only just visible, hovering over it like an unclean thing.

She dipped her skinny fingers into the bag, and then, muttering something in a low tone, dropped a few herbs into the fast-expiring flame.

It leaped up in a lurid blaze, bringing the hag and several awe-stricken negroes standing in a cluster opposite Merville, into bold relief.

The crooning of the old woman arose to a wail here, as she walked slowly around the fire, waving her long, scrawny arms over it, with her eyes glittering, and her expression that of one in superstitious ecstasy.

A roll of thunder at this moment assisted in making the scene still more weird, and Luke dropped upon his knees at the side of Leonard, and moaned as if he were suffering physical pain.

Again the hag dropped some herbs into her fire, and again the crooning rose higher and higher, as the old woman moved faster and faster around the glowing embers, that dropped into a dull red each time after the spurt of flame caused by the placing of fresh herbs on the fire.

"De voodoo ain't gwine to wo'k till I git money!" proclaimed the old woman, after she had put several pinches of herbs into the fire, and had crooned herself hoarse.

There was a rustling among the negroes at the other side of the room, and then they came forward one by one, and dropped some coins into the old woman's hand.

Although she was pretty warm and excited over her incantations, she was self-possessed enough to count the money and see that it was not quite as much as she wanted.

"Free dolla's an' fifty cents! I must hab five dolla's or de voodoo not wo'k," she proclaimed, looking sidelong at Leonard.

He uttered a sneering laugh, and putting his hand in his pocket, drew forth two silver dollars, which he placed in the old woman's outstretched palm.

She grasped the money with a chuckle, and bid it in her clothing somewhere, as she stretched forth her other hand to the girl for the rag that held the herbs, and that she had given her to hold while she collected her fees.

The scene was resumed where she had left off, and to the accompaniments of lightning and crashing thunder, the hag circled around her fire in a horrible dance, that became more excited as she went on.

She did not utter any intelligible words, but her weird singing never ceased as she danced about her fire, throwing her arms wildly above her head, and throwing her herbs into the fire at intervals.

Her dancing grew more excited as she went on, and her long, bare arms looked like blasted limbs of trees as she threw them over her head, and occasionally pointed a skinny finger at the group of negroes on the other side of the cabin, or directly at Luke. Her clothing had fallen from her shoulders, and her chest heaved as if under the influence of fearful excitement, while the perspiration poured down her face in streams.

Luke was completely overcome with horror, while even Merville, devil-may-care rascal as he was, could not help being impressed by the supernatural suggestions of the scene.

The negroes were now groveling in the dirt on the floor, while the girl, who had kept close to the fire throughout the wild dance of the old woman, presented an appearance of abject fear very different from that of the smiling indifference with which she had greeted Dale Graham early in the evening.

The old woman's dance had been growing faster until it was an abandoned gallop such as is ascribed to the witches of old. Her face had taken on an expression of insanity, and if she did not believe in the voodoo she was invoking, she was making a very good imitation of belief in her aspect and actions.

Suddenly she dropped at full length upon the floor by the side of her fire, where she lay sprawling, with her arms still moving, as if even the giving out of her strength could not make her give up her attempts to invoke the aid of her familiar spirits to charm the money out of the pockets of the awe-stricken negroes.

"Infernal tomfoolery!" growled Merville to himself, as he bestowed a hearty kick upon the person of prostrate Luke, without obtaining any response save a groan.

He strode across the cabin, and looked down at the other negroes, who were lying in a terrified heap in a corner, mumbling and tossing about like the demented creatures that they were.

"I was to meet some of the gang here," he went on, to himself. "This is the date, and it is more important than ever that I should see some of them, and tell them of the danger we are all in. That miserable Sam Wilson means mischief and unless we can get the swag out of that cave right quick we may lose the whole thing."

He was stooping over Luke to give him a harder kick than before when something bounded out of the blackness on the opposite side of the cabin, and he received a blow in the face that knocked him backward through the doorway, on top of the door, that his weight had forced from its crazy hinges.

CHAPTER XX.

"HALT!"

To spring to his feet and grapple with his unknown antagonist was the work of an instant for Merville.

The fire had flickered and gone out, the clouds that obscured the heavens were a thick black pall that showed no sign of lifting for the present.

Merville, therefore, could not see who it was that had made the sudden attack upon him, but he found him to be a lithe, powerful fellow, who understood the science of pugilism and wrestling, and who was able to hold his own with Leonard in the struggle.

"Curse you! Who are you?" howled Leonard.

There was no answer, save a closer hug that seemed as if its purpose was to crush his bones into powder. Leonard tried to strike at his opponent, but he was held in such a fearful grip that he was absolutely powerless.

He tugged and strained, and he thought he was at last making some impression, when a hated voice sounded in his ears—that of Fearless Sam, which said:

"Better give it up, Leonard. I'm on ter yer."

Then his hands were suddenly jerked behind him, and a pair of handcuffs snapped on his wrists, as a blaze of light from a bull's lantern was thrown upon the face of the detective, so that there should be no doubt in the mind of the young man as to who was his captor.

Another lantern was produced then, and, as it was opened, so as to cast a glare all around, Merville found himself in the presence of Handel Montgomery, Canada Jack, the Skeleton Dude, Fearless Sam, and Dale Graham.

Finding himself helpless, Leonard Merville looked around him with his usual sneer, and said:

"Seems to me you have brought the whole show with you. Where's Tom Elliott and—Belle Howard? She—"

Graham's hand was clapped over Merville's mouth, as the young man hissed:

"Mention that young lady's name again, and I'll strike you dead where you stand, you inhuman villain!"

"Oh, indeed!" snarled Leonard. "And how long have you had the right to be her champion? As the affianced husband of Miss Howard, I claim to be as much interested in having her treated with respect as any one!"

The smile that accompanied this remark was too much for Dale. He sprung upon Leonard and forced him to the ground, clutching his throat with a fierceness that would have ended the career of the villain there and then, had it lasted a few moments longer.

"What er durned idiot you young fellers are!" exclaimed Fearless Sam, as he coolly, and without any exertion, apparently, seized Dale by the back of the coat collar, and jerked him away. "What is ther use of you exciting yerself? We are going to take Mr. Merville back ter ther show, an' we don't want him all broken up before we get him thar. Besides, he is handcuffed, an' I believe in giving every man a show, no matter what he's done, or how or'nary he may be!"

He lifted Merville to his feet, and stood between him and Dale Graham to prevent further hostilities.

"Thanks, Fearless! I believe you are a square man to that extent. You and I are enemies, but we would not touch each other except in a square fight. As for this cur, he dare not touch me except when I have my hands bunched behind me—"

"Liar!" broke in Dale Graham, hotly.

"Keep it up!" sneered Merville. "You can call me liar or anything now, while I have these handcuffs on."

"You did not hesitate to put them on me, though, did you?" retorted Graham, displaying his right hand, upon the wrist of which the steel bracelets still dangled.

"And it didn't take four or five men to put them on you, either," sneered Leonard.

"Enough of that," put in Fearless Sam. "Quit your quarreling. Come on, boys! We are going back. We have to get back to the show. I promised Old Tom I would be back in the morning, with all his performers."

"This is a nice way to take me back, with my hands behind me. Isn't it?" asked Merville, savagely.

"That's all right. I'll take them off before it is time for you to go into the ring," answered Fearless, cheerfully.

Then, as he caught sight of a heap of humanity just inside the door of the hut—a bundle of something dark, with staring eyes and quivering mouth, he burst into a loud laugh.

"Wal, I'll be durned! Luke!"

He stepped inside and dragged out the negro, who, more dead than alive, looked from the detective to Leonard, and back again, and then into the faces of the rest, with an expression of such intense misery, that even Leonard Merville could not help smiling.

"Oh, Mas'r Leonard. What a fearful 'sperience! 'Deed, she's a great voodoo woman. I never done see nothin' like it afore in my life. 'Deed I didn't. I'se sure she's de sister ob de debbil. Dat's what she is. Oh, glory! glory!"

"The nigger's crazy with that thar monkey shine in thar," exclaimed the detective, as he shook the disgruntled Luke till his teeth rattled and his eyes rolled loosely in their sockets.

He turned toward Merville and motioned to him to move away from the hut. The young man obeyed, and Canada Jack walked into the forest for a few moments, while Fearless Sam

kept his eyes on Leonard, but without appearing to do so.

Soon Canada Jack returned from his mysterious mission into the forest, and then the pawing of hoofs was heard, as if there were a number of horses in the vicinity.

"Got 'em all, Canada?" asked the detective.

"Yes."

"Good! Leonard!"

"Well?"

"Get on this hor' e."

"How can I, with my hands fastened?" asked Leonard, gruffly.

"Come, don't give me any guff of that thar kind," returned Sam. "This hyar's your own ring horse, Starlight, an' you kin git on his back, hands fast or not. You know that as well as I do."

"Guess you're right, Fearless. I didn't know it was Starlight, or I would not have objected. Here, Starlight!"

The horse—a magnificent black thoroughbred—saddled over to Leonard as he heard his voice, and rubbed his nose against the young man's chest, with a loving movement.

"I can't pat you, Starlight, for my hands are behind me, but I'll owe it to you," said Leonard.

Then he turned half around so that his right elbow rested on the horse's back, and, with a sudden and vigorous movement, was in the saddle.

"Well done, Leonard! Blamed if you ain't a spry boy, if yer are er rascal," muttered the detective, half aloud.

Jack was bringing four other horses and a donkey forward from the dense forest, and Sam was about to apportion them among the crowd, when a slight stir in the rear made him start and draw his six-shooter.

There was a galloping of hoofs and a wild cry of triumph from Merville, as the detective blazed away in the direction of the disturbance, and then threw himself upon the back of one of the horses at his side.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Merville, and the detective knew that the young man had got the best of him in some way.

"Whar's that nigger, Luke?" he cried, as he looked hastily around him, with the aid of his bull's-eye lantern.

"Deed then, Mas'r Fearless, I'm all right," responded the negro's voice, and the detective saw that Luke was on a horse, and was galloping away at the heels of Starlight, who was showing his thoroughbred origin by swinging along at a pace that could not be equaled by any horse left behind with the detective's party.

"That durned nigger hez another horse, nearly as good as Starlight, too," growled the detective, in disgusted tones. "We'll hev ter let 'em go this time, I s'pose. But if they ever get near the Parole again, I bet I'll keep my eye on them until I probe this bank business to the bottom."

"Well, governor, what are we going to do? Shall we go back to the cave, and try once more to get into it? You think the money is there, don't you?" asked Jack.

"Yes, Canada. I'm convinced that the key to this mystery is in that cave, but we have tried all we could to get into it, and it is evident that we must have the assistance of Merville to accomplish our purpose," answered Fearless, rather dejectedly, for he felt keenly the triumph of Leonard, even although it was but temporary, as he was convinced.

Dale Graham heard what Sam had said about the cave, but he did not think it a propitious time to go there, although he knew that he could take them into it, if he chose, when the opening of the iron-bound box that contained at least half of the money that the detective was after, would be but a question of time and patience.

Dale Graham was only human, and he was tired enough to want to get back to the Parole for a good rest, to say nothing of his hope of coming up with Leonard again, and being on hand to protect Belle Howard, should it be necessary.

"Wal, boys, let's travel," said the detective, after a moment's pause, during which he appeared to be thinking deeply. "I can see a faint streak of light in thar clouds over thar in thar east, an' it'll be broad daylight by thar time we git over thar to thar Parole again."

Although he had leaped upon the back of a horse, with the intention of following Leonard and the negro, he had caught himself in time with the reflection that it would be only waste of energy to do it. So, as he sat on his horse like a statue, the others moved around him and could talk to him while making preparations to travel.

The inmates of the hut all seemed to be exhausted, and none of them came out to see what was going on. They were probably accustomed to unusual proceedings—that is, proceedings that would be unusual elsewhere—and they did not regard it as their business to interfere in anything that might be done by visitors to the old sibyl away back there in the forest.

"What are we going to do about these horses, Fearless?" asked Canada Jack. "There's only two besides the jackass."

"Wal, let me see," returned Sam. "You can hev one horse and Dale Graham thar other."

Then we can put Montgomery on thar donkey, and Shadow, who doesn't weigh very much, can ride on the jackass with Handel. That'll be er very good arrangement."

"Will it?" spluttered the Skeleton, who had been listening with much interest to the remarks of the detective. "Well, I don't mean to ride with that Englishman, so I tell you, right now."

"And I think it's bad enough to put me on a blooming donkey, without insulting me any more, and most certainly you might do without asking me to take that Skeleton cove on the animal with me. I never could abide thin men, any ways."

There would probably have been a breaking out of the ever-smoldering animosity between Mr. K'ffey and the concertina-player had not the detective prevented it by hastily suggesting that the Skeleton should ride with Graham.

Dale acquiesced in this arrangement cheerfully, and the Skeleton, with much dignity, expressed his satisfaction. So it was settled that way, although Handel Montgomery took his seat on the back of the donkey with considerable disgust.

"Now for the Parole," said the detective. "March!"

The cavalcade moved away through the trees into a clearing where they could make pretty good time, just as the gray dawn broke over the scene, and showed how utterly desolate was the spot in which the voodoo woman had her abode.

"I'll be glad to see the old Parole agai'," observed Jack.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when four masked men rode out from a clump of bushes, each with two six-shooters in his hands, and commanded the party to halt.

Sam took in the situation instantly, and he drew up without a word.

"Hands up!" continued the leader of the masked party, and five pairs of hands went up over the heads of the detective and his followers without a word.

"What's thar trouble?" asked the detective, calmly. "Is this hyer er hold-up? Ef it is, I tell yer you will find that it will be an expensive game to yer."

"It ain't no hold-up," returned the leader. "But it will probably be er string-up when we git back to town with yer. Them bosses that you hev belong ter some of the citizens, an' I tell yer we are death on hoss-thieves in this hyer section."

"Oh, is that all?" observed the detective, with a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER XXI.

A MISCELLANEOUS LOT.

"RIDE along in front of us, an' don't try ter do anything crooked or yer'll die on the spot. Understand?" asked the leader of the party, as he pointed with his pistols which way the detective and his followers were to go, and which Fearless Sam noted was away from the town and almost in the direction from which they had come.

"Wonder what's up?" thought the detective.

He did not say anything, but using his left hand on his bridle-rein, in accordance with the command of the leader, he turned his horse and rode on, with his people behind him, and the masked men behind them, still holding their revolvers ready for action, while the detective and his party kept their right hands in the air above their heads.

They were a remarkable-looking procession, but no one seemed disposed to enjoy the humor of the situation.

Sam was thinking hard, and he was satisfied that he had about unraveled the meaning of this hold-up on a trumped-up accusation of horse-stealing. He did not communicate his suspicions to his companions for several reasons, the most important being the fact that he had no opportunity to address them while the six-shooters of his captors were so handy and evidently ready to discharge their loads at the least excuse.

It was a beautiful morning, after the rain, and the wet grass sent up a fragrance that was like wine to the tired men. The detective, who never permitted himself to be worried if he could help it, whatever happened, gave himself up to the enjoyment of nature, and gradually allowed his hand to drop until it rested on his shoulder.

Jack and the Skeleton were accustomed to watching Fearless and taking their cue from him, and when they saw that he had let his right hand drop to some extent, they followed his example.

"Hands up, thar!" suddenly commanded the leader of the other party, in gruff and threatening tones.

His order was instantly obeyed, but not without protest on the part of the detective.

"See hyar, stranger," he said, "it's impossible fer men ter ride all thar morning with their hands up in thar air. We are in your power—you hev thar drop on us, hevn't yer?"

The leader did not vouchsafe any answer, and Sam went on:

"Wal, yer hev, whether yer answer me or not. Now, why can't you let us drop our hands. We couldn't do nothin' without you git-ting er chance ter plug us over an' over again first."

The leader whispered to the man riding by his side and then, with a nod, responded:

"Thar's sense in what you say. Drop yer hands, but you know what you'll git ef you try any monkey business."

"Cert," answered the detective, cheerfully, as he allowed his right hand to fall carelessly to his side, just level with the top of the pocket in his sack coat in which reposed his revolver.

His companions all dropped their hands, too, while they kept their eyes on the detective, as closely as they dared, as if seeking a hint from him.

Sam could feel that his revolver was all right, and that, with a quick movement, he might draw and fire, although it would be at the imminent risk of his life, for he could not hide from himself the fact that his captors favored him with more attention than they gave to the rest, as if recognizing in him the most dangerous man in the party.

For some time they rode on, until the detective noted, with an interest that almost made him forget that he and his companions were prisoners, that they were nearing the cave which he had been trying to find his way into earlier in the morning.

"I believe I can see through all this hyar scheme," he muttered, "an' ef I can, why, there will be a good stroke of business done to-day, after all."

Sure enough, the party rode up to the rear entrance of the cave, by which Dale had made his way into the cave, but which the detective had not been able to find, and then one of the masked men went inside.

Where Fearless Sam sat on his horse he had a good view of the interior of the cave, and he saw the man open the iron-bound box, and then observed that there were bundles of greenbacks inside.

The moment for action had now arrived.

He glanced sideways at Jack, and saw that he was ready for whatever it might be necessary to do. He was familiar with the expressions of Canada's face, and knew that the grafter could be depended upon in cases of emergency. As for Graham and the Skeleton, there was no question about their readiness, and he felt pretty sure that the red-whiskered, petulant Montgomery would be found equal to a sudden demand upon his courage and activity.

The masked leader of the party was sitting at the left of the detective, with his revolver poised in his hand, and the muzzle pointed directly at Sam's forehead.

It was a ticklish moment for the detective, but he knew he must take chances, as he had hundreds of times before in his life.

His hand had stolen into the pocket of his pilot coat and was firmly clasped over the butt of his revolver, with his forefinger on the trigger. The question was whether he could safely draw the weapon and discharge it.

A moment's consideration convinced Fearless that this would be taking too much risk. At the same time, he knew that now was the time to escape from his present predicament if he were ever to do so. The talk about his party being suspected to be horse-thieves he knew was only a ruse. But he was not sure that they might not suffer more than if they had been such if they did not get away from this gang at once.

One last glance at Jack to make sure that he was ready, and then, without taking his hand from the pocket of his coat, he pulled the trigger of his revolver.

Although Sam had no opportunity of taking precise aim, he hit what he fired at.

His bullet struck the pistol in the hand of the leader of the masked gang, and sent it spinning away, far out of reach.

The detective followed up his shot by springing upon the man, who was confused by the suddenness of the attack, and the two men were rolling on the ground, while Graham, Canada Jack and the Skeleton were upon the other two, and had disarmed them.

At the same instant Montgomery fired a warning shot close to the ear of the man in the cave, who was bending over the strong-box, and kept his revolver pointed at him till he saw how things would turn out with his friends.

The victory was complete.

In less time than it takes to tell it, the situation was exactly reversed from that of a minute before, and the four masked men were sitting on their horses, without arms and completely at the mercy of Sam and his friends.

"Take their masks off," commanded the detective, and the Skeleton Dude, who was enjoying himself amazingly, obeyed on the instant.

As Sam had expected, two of the rascals proved to be Leonard Merville and Luke, while the other two were men well known to the detective as professional thieves.

"Wal, Leonard!" observed the detective, with a smile.

"Well," returned the young man.

"It didn't go, did it, eh?"

"No; but it will some day."

"Maybe. It the mean time, I am going to take charge of this cash. I guess I have as much right to it as you."

"Have you? That remains to be seen. By what right do you go into a place that belongs to me and take money that is my own? If I see fit to take care of my money by hiding it, instead of placing it in a bank, what business is that of yours?"

"You are a pretty smart fellow, Merville, but that sort of thing does not go. I shall not keep the money if you can prove as it's yours. If you can't, why, we will try and find out whose it is. See?"

"This outrage will cost you dearly, Sam Wilson. You mark my words!" snarled Leonard.

"And you mark mine, Leonard Merville," returned the detective with more heat than he usually displayed. "You have done enough crooked things while you hev been with Tom Elliott's show to put you in the Penitentiary for er long term of years."

"Have I?"

"Yes, you hev, an' don't you rile me, or it will be worse fer yer now. I am on the track of er certain bank robbery, an' until I run my man down I'm goin' ter take charge of any cash I may find that don't seem ter be in the hands of its rightful owner. Until I get that case worked up I don't propose ter let you out of my sight."

"So we are going back to the show, are we?"

"We are. And when we get thar you just attend ter yer business, an' you may get along fer awhile without locking horns with me. Ef you don't, why—"

The detective did not finish his sentence in words, but there was a look in his blue eyes that the young man fully understood, for he did not say anything in reply, as Sam directed Montgomery and the Skeleton to pack all the money in two large canvas bags that were in the box and bring it along.

The detective's orders were obeyed, and Handel was standing by the side of Sam's horse, asking him whether he should carry all the money himself, or trust some of it to Shadow, when an ejaculation from Jack made him turn quickly and instinctively dodge to one side.

It was well that he did so, for he only just missed a desperate lunge from a long knife that Luke had managed to hide in his clothing, and that he had aimed at the middle of the detective's back, where it would certainly have found his heart and ended his career forthwith.

"What er blackguard you are, Luke!" observed Fearless, calmly, as he slapped the negro on the side of the face with such force that he knocked him off his horse, while the knife flew from his hand a long way beyond his reach.

The detective did not make any more remarks on Luke's futile attempt to murder him, but just set the whole party in motion, and they went at a brisk trot to the little town down the river where the Tom Elliott show was to appear the next day.

They did not follow the windings of the river, but by cutting across country, managed to get even with the boat before she had gone very far on her way.

It was late in the afternoon when they sighted the Parole steaming lazily down the stream, and before the detective had tried to signal her he had the satisfaction of seeing her heading directly for the shore toward a spot where there was a good depth of water near the bank, and where it would be possible to run the horses up the broad gang-plank without danger of the boat grounding.

"What have you there?" were the first words of Old Tom, as Fearless Sam made all the party ride up to the boat's lower deck ahead of him.

The detective took off his broad-brimmed hat and brought the silk handkerchief into use in polishing his shiny head, as he answered:

"A very miscellaneous lot, Tom."

CHAPTER XXII.

FEARLESS ARRANGES A MILL.

WHEN Sam had his men safely on board of the Parole he felt easier in mind than he had for some time.

The first thing he did when the boat pulled out into the middle of the stream again was to ask Tom Elliott whether there was any intention of going inshore before the morning, when it was expected to reach Delta, just above Vicksburg, where there was to be a show given the next day.

"Not much," was Old Tom's response.

"All right, then. I'll turn in and hev the first good sleep I've hed fer several days. I am about played out."

"That's right, Sam. You've earned a sleep. But tell me, where did you find that confounded Leonard?"

"I'll tell you when I get up, Tom. But, keep your eyes peeled for treachery. Ef he or Luke try ter git away or ter play any of their or'nary tricks, wake me, an' without delay."

"And what about them other fellers that you have brought with you? Do you want them?"

"Wal, yer see, I hev no right ter do anything with them unless I can get something ag'in' 'em. I know they are professional crooks, but so long as they are not doing anything I don't know what I can do."

"But didn't they try to kidnap yer? The Skeleton said something about it."

"Durn thet K'ffey! He must go talking. Wal, Tom, try to keep ther fellers aboard, but particularly watch Leonard and Luke. They are ther fellers I hev ter pick er bone with. I don't s'pose they'll trouble you fer some time. They're about as tired as I am, I guess."

The detective's assumption was correct. Of all the party that had come back from the woods where the voodoo dance was held, and where the money that the detective had safely deposited in the boat's safe was hidden, not one remained about the boat.

All had retired. Leonard and Graham went to their own state-rooms in as matter-of-fact a way as if they had never been away from the Parole save to appear at the show, and Luke was fast asleep on a heap of canvas on the lower deck. Montgomery and Shadow, who were not so high in rank in the show as Dale and Leonard, were asleep in the long saloon, on cots set apart for the cheaper people of the show, although they were as far apart as they could manage, for they had not settled their animosity yet, and it seemed as if they never would.

The horses, which were all the property of Old Tom Elliott, were comfortably disposed, and as the boat went down the Father of Waters, by the light of the moon that was just struggling above the horizon, there was nothing to indicate that the Parole held anything but a peaceful and happy family, brute and human.

Those who had taken part in the night's adventures in the woods were still asleep when Belle Howard, as bright as the morning itself, came from her state-room, and stood thoughtfully in the bow of the boat, watching the water and the scenery of the banks on either side.

She had not been there long when she heard a step behind her, at the same time that a voice said:

"Belle!"

She turned quickly, with a smile, and held out her hand to Dale Graham.

"Dale, I'm glad to see you."

"Thanks."

"That's rather a short way to receive my remark," she laughed. "I suppose you are not thinking what you are saying, or who you are saying it to."

"I beg your pardon, Belle," returned the young man. "No, you are right. I was not thinking just what I was saying. I was trying to make up my mind what I had better do about Merville."

"Don't do anything, Dale. I do not fear him now. I have you to protect me, and Sam Wilson is always on the watch, too."

"True, Belle, but Leonard is a desperate man, who is plunged deeper into questionable business than you have any idea of."

"Well, really, Dale, I do not see what his doings have to do with me, for I never mean to have anything more to do with him than I can help, although," with a shudder, "he exerts such a strange influence over me sometimes that I am afraid of him."

Dale Graham's brow grew dark.

"If he tries anything of that kind again it will be the worse for him," he muttered.

"Where did you go yesterday? Old Tom Elliott was asking for you, but Sam said you were all right, so I did not worry."

"Would you have worried otherwise?" asked the young man, while a deep glow of pleasure suffused his cheek.

"I should worry about any friend I have whom I thought was in peril," she answered, evasively; but, there was a telltale blush that satisfied Graham.

"I just took a little ride into the country, that was all," he said, for he did not think it worth while to tell her of all his adventures, and how nearly he had been prevented from coming back at all.

"Well, all I have to say is that you must watch Merville. He is dangerous."

"I am not afraid of him," answered the young man, lightly.

"Glad to hear it," chimed in the voice of Leonard, as that young man stepped forward, neat and clean, and showing no traces of the rough time he had had the night before save in the shape of a discolored eye, as the result of Dale Graham's fist having been planted there in the scuffle near the voodoo woman's hut.

Graham stood close by the side of Belle Howard, and as Leonard approached her, her lover placed his arm around her waist.

"Good-morning, Leonard," said Belle, nervously, for she felt instinctively that there was danger of some kind in the atmosphere, and she thought it well to be polite to the young man, much as she disliked as well as feared him.

"I said just what I meant, Merville," said Dale, as he looked fiercely into the sneering face of his enemy. "I am not afraid of you, and you know it."

"At least, you might be polite enough to refrain from this sort of talk in the presence of a lady," retorted Leonard.

"That comes well from you! You are so particular about the rules of politeness! I think I would rather be a little lax in that direction than be cowardly enough to try and kill that same lady by an unprofessional trick."

Merville's hand moved quickly to his hip-pocket, and Graham was no less rapid in reaching for his side-pocket.

"What do you mean?" asked Leonard, as he dropped his hand with a contemptuous toss of the head.

"Dale, for my sake—" whispered Belle.

"For your sake," he retorted in the same low tone, "I mean to tell this fellow what I think of him."

"What do you mean?" repeated Leonard, who had seen that there was some interchange of words between the two, and suspected strongly what had been said.

"I mean, that your act on the trapeze the other day was an unprofessional as it was cowardly. That you purposely allowed this girl to miss her tip, with the chance—the almost certainty—of her being killed. It was not your fault her friends were on the watch and frustrated your fiendish scheme."

Merville's face became livid, allowing the black mark under his eye to stand out with fearful distinctness.

"You lie!" he hissed, between his set teeth.

Dale made a step forward, and Leonard threw himself into a posture of defense.

"Dale—Leon rd!" cried the young girl, alarmed to such a degree that she could not restrain herself.

"Belle," whispered Dale, "go away! I must settle this trouble at some time, and I may as well do it now. Don't you see that?"

Belle Howard was used to seeing contests of skill and strength between men—and women, too, and she saw at once that Dale was right. She hesitated for a moment, and then, that peculiar power that it seemed as if Merville could exercise over her at will, made her move away, leaving the two men alone.

"Now, Dale Graham, I am going to get even with you for this," hissed Leonard.

He made a sweeping motion toward his discolored eye, and Dale smiled.

"What are you going to do—shoot?"

"No. I am going to thrash you with my fists. Do you understand? I am going to whip you, like a dog."

"When is this whipping to take place?" asked Dale, who was becoming cooler in proportion to his enemy's increase of excitement.

"Now."

"Come on, then!"

Dale threw himself into the easy posture of a trained athlete handy with his fists. Merville did the same.

They stood, face to face, looking straight into each other's eyes, for perhaps half a minute, when a man stepped between them.

It was Fearless Sam!

He held his hat in his left hand, while his right, holding a red silk handkerchief, was industriously polishing his bald head.

"Wal, what's up?" he asked, carelessly.

"Stand on one side, Sam Wilson! I'll attend to you later," commanded Leonard, savagely.

"I guess not."

Leonard Merville, in a paroxysm of rage, aimed a blow at Fearless Sam, and the next moment he was sprawling on the deck, while the detective was coolly whipping his head with his silk handkerchief.

"You should not try ter fool with yer uncle," observed Sam, cheerily. "Seems ter me, Merville, as if you never would learn sense, so it does."

Leonard slowly arose to his feet, while Sam kept a wary eye on him.

"Sam Wilson, I am going to fight this fellow Graham with my bare hands. I am going to whip him till he can't stand, and if you are any man at all you will not interfere."

The young man spoke distinctly, but with great effort, proving how hard he was trying to keep his rage within bounds.

Graham, who had dropped his hands at the detective's interference, but who was ready to resume hostilities at a moment's notice, waited curiously to see the end of the dispute.

The detective turned toward Dale.

"Dale, is this a fact? Is he going to whip you till you can't stand, as he says?"

"So be says," answered Dale, with a smile that exasperated the acrobat to an almost unbearable point.

"What will you be doing while he is whipping yer?"

"Trying to make it interesting for him."

"So I supposed. Wal, now, I'll tell yer, Leonard: You an' this hyar young feller seem to hev got inter er dispute that must be settled somehow, and you seem ter want ter do it with yer fists. All right. I hevn't anything ter say ag'in' thet. It's er good, manly way ter do it. But, as decent fellers, yer ought ter do it accordin' ter ther rules of ther ring, eh?"

"Any way he likes," returned Leonard, carelessly.

"Good! And what do you say, Dale?"

"I don't care."

"Good again. Wal, you can't do it right hyar, 'cause you would interfere with business, an' it would be altogether too public. Do you take me?"

The detective's silk handkerchief was in full use now, and he was polishing away at his head until it shone like a mirror.

The two young men nodded.

"Now, just step hyar back of the animal cages, and we'll hev as pretty er little mill as was ever seen at the Manhattan Club or anywhar else."

He motioned to Merville to go first. Then he came, followed y Dale. He did not want the two foes to commence tearing at each other until everything was arranged according to his own rather fastidious notions of what was right in such a matter.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A COWARD AND A CUR.

"HELLO, what's the blooming fun?" cried Montgomery, as he met the procession passing the foot of the staircase leading from the main deck.

The concertina-player, like the rest, felt all the better for his sleep, and with his red whiskers flowing down to his shoulders almost, and a generally spruce air, was as gay an object as could be seen along the whole length of the Mississippi that morning.

"Handel, come along. You may be useful. You know all about this hyar sort of business, I know," said the detective.

"What is it? Not a blooming dog-fight, is it?"

"Better! A mill!"

"Jiminy crikey! I haven't seen such a thing for a year! These two blokies are the principals, I suppose."

"Yes, and we want you for a bottle-holder."

"I'm your man! My! isn't this a prime lark? I was just dying for some excitement."

In his enthusiasm Handel put up his own hands and sparred away at the wind in most scientific style, finishing by bestowing a swinging right-hander—full into the stomach of the Skeleton Dude, who had come up behind him unseen by the concertina-player.

The unfortunate Skeleton went spinning across the deck, doubled up and howling with pain and rage.

"All right," muttered Handel to himself; "that squares things with that blooming bag o' bones. I didn't mean to do it, but as I have done it, let it go." Then, skipping over to the Skeleton, he picked him up, inquiring most solicitously whether he was hurt.

For a moment Mr. Koffey could not speak, but as soon as he recovered his voice, he exclaimed:

"That means a licking for you, Mr. Handel Montgomery! You are always doing something like that!"

"Why, s' help me never!" cried Handel, "if I ever hit you afore. I wouldn't do it a-purpose, you know that, Shadow. Now, don't you?"

Shadow was too indignant to reply, and he stalked after the two young men and the detective, who had reached the proposed battleground by this time, and were looking it over to see that there was room.

The Skeleton did not know what was going to take place, but he went with the crowd, according to his invariable custom, for excitement of any kind was the breath of life to him.

"Hello, Shadow, what do you know about sparring?" asked Fearless Sam, as the Skeleton appeared on the scene.

"Everything."

"Then you are just the man we want. You second Leonard, and you, Handel, take care of Dale Graham. I will be time-keeper."

"Wait while I get a blooming sponge and things," cried Handel. "We can't go on till things are in some sort of shape, don't you know."

Handel was enjoying the affair intensely, and it did not take him more than a minute to find a pail of water, two sponges and a bottle of vinegar. Then he rushed up-stairs to get some towels, and came down waving two of those articles triumphantly in his hands.

"Crikey! Ain't this a barney? I haven't had so much pleasure since I left Old England."

Handel Montgomery was taking the matter into his own hands, so far as details were concerned, but Fearless Sam kept a watchful eye upon the two principals, and particularly on Leonard, whom he did not trust further than he could see him.

Neither of the young men moved, however. They stood several feet apart, looking somewhat contemptuously at Handel as he bustled about over his preparations, and it was evident that each considered the difficulty might be settled without so much fuss and feathers.

At last Handel declared himself ready. He had placed the pail of water to one side, and had

handed a damp sponge and towel to the Skeleton—who evidently did not know what to do with them—and kept the others himself.

"Now then, come forward and shake hands."

The two young men looked at him, but did not make any approach to the formality suggested.

"Oh, I forgot! You had better take off your coats, I guess," he said, as he noticed that the prospective combatants wore their regular pilot jackets, which would be likely to hamper their movements.

Without a word Dale and Leonard removed their coats and vests, and fastened their suspenders around their waists. Then they rolled up their shirt sleeves, and the detective thought, as he looked from one to the other, that both were excellent specimens of physical manhood.

"Look fit to fight for their lives," was his muttered comment, as he eyed them over with the discernment of a connoisseur. "And I shouldn't wonder if that is what they will have to do," he added, significantly, as he noted the determination in the face of each.

As the young men came forward after taking off their outer clothing, the detective again directed them to shake hands.

"We will dispense with that part of the business," said Leonard, coldly.

"But you can't, you know," put in Handel Montgomery. "It won't be legitimate if you go battering each other without shaking hands. Besides, the seconds have to shake hands across the ring, too. It is the regular thing, don't you know. I'm a blooming goat if I see how we can go on without it."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," observed the Skeleton, addressing everybody except Handel, "I don't mean to shake hands with that red-whiskered kangaroo, so that settles that."

"What's that?" burst from the concertina-player, as his face got as red as his whiskers at the insult.

"Shut up!" cried the detective. "Time!"

He had made up his mind that it was altogether too serious a matter for hand-shaking.

The two combatants, both of whom were somewhat disgusted with the delay that had taken place in accordance with the whims of Handel Montgomery, marched toward each other, with their hands up in scientific posture.

It was apparent at once that both were well versed in the noble art of self-defense. Their attitude was such as would have delighted a professor of boxing, and their movements, quick as those of a cat, as they sparred for an opening, made Montgomery, a fair judge of such things, fairly writhe with admiration.

"I'm blowed if they don't handle their maulars like Britons," he exclaimed, enthusiastically.

Each man held his left well advanced, with his right guarding his face; Merville's guard was rather lower than that of Dale, but otherwise their positions were about the same.

"Come, get ter work," cried the detective. "London prize ring rules govern. You fight till one of yer is down. Go ahead."

It was hardly necessary for Fearless Sam to give these orders. The sparring did not last more than five seconds, for Leonard made a terrific lunge at Dale's nose, which was neatly lefited, Leonard receiving a sounding tap on the cheek.

"Well done, Dale, my covey!" exclaimed Handel, who was dodging around the combatants with a sponge and towel, only too anxious for an opportunity to show his skill as a second.

"No remarks, please," cautioned the detective.

The rebuff that Leonard received on making his first rush rendered him rather more cautious. He was boiling with rage within, but outwardly bore himself coolly enough, and most certainly he did not allow his wrath to affect his tactics as a sparrer.

A few more passes, and then there was a resounding crash, as Dale caught Leonard on the chin and sent him in a heap upon the floor.

As Leonard fell, and saw the gleam of triumph in his rival's eye, he could not restrain himself, and all his customary coolness vanished in an instant.

Montgomery had approached Dale, officiously, with his sponge and towel, and the Skeleton was looking at Leonard in a start of doubt as to what he ought to do, when Leonard settled the matter by springing to his feet, and drawing his revolver from his hip-pocket, firing straight at Dale Graham.

Well that Fearless Sam was on the watch for treachery, or most assuredly Dale's career would have ended at that moment.

There was a loud report, but the bullet buried itself in the thick lining of the lion's cage, several feet over the intended victim.

Sam had knocked up the pistol just as Merville pulled trigger.

With an oath, the young lion-tamer leveled his weapon again, but the detective was ready for him, and one determined tug was enough to enable him to force it out of the hand of the now maddened Merville, and push him in a corner, where he found himself in the grasp of

Canada Jack, who had just arrived on the scene, and was in time to be of excellent service.

Graham, pale, but determined, stepped up to Merville, and snapping his fingers in his face, said, in a low, fierce tone:

"Leonard Merville, you are a coward and a cur! If I fight you again, it will be with a horsewhip. I will lay it about you as I would any other dog!"

And he walked away, leaving his rival fairly foaming with impotent rage.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ANOTHER ACT IN THE VENDETTA.

THE fight between the two young men, that had ended so unsatisfactorily for Merville, had hardly been settled when the boat drew into Delta, where there were to be two shows given—afternoon and evening.

The usual bustle took place in getting the canvas out and putting up the tents, and the two rivals were brought into contact more than once during the preparations.

But there were no disturbances to mark the ill-feeling that prevailed between them.

They regarded their performances in the ring simply as business, and although, in a tumbling act, Dale Graham had to stand on Leonard Merville's shoulders, and then hold his hands as he turned upside down, neither felt any embarrassment over being brought into apparently amicable relations. They were performers, and as such knew that such awkward meetings were unavoidable.

It must not be supposed, however, that there was any abatement of the hate that each felt for the other. Leonard Merville would like to have thrown his rival head-first to the ground while he held him feet upward in the air. But he did not do it. He had too much professional pride for that. He would not spoil his act for the sake of gratifying his revenge, even.

So the performance went on, and the people who applauded had no idea that there was a tragedy beneath the spangles and glitter of the ring. The show was drawing to a close, and already the canvas-men had removed the sideshow to the tents, and were only waiting for the conclusion of the performance in the big tent to pack that away too.

The animal cages were all on board, and the property of the show was being removed piecemeal to the boat as the show progressed.

In this work, Handel Montgomery and the Skeleton Dude were taking an active part, since they did not have to appear in the big tent until the concert that followed the main performance.

The bad blood between Shadow and Handel was still boiling, and many were the sly nudges and jars they gave each other in handling the various things that had to be packed on wagons or carried aboard the Parole.

"See here, Shadow, you haven't any reason to knock the corner of that blooming trunk into a cave, have you?" demanded Mr. Montgomery, angrily, as the Skeleton maliciously tipped over a trunk that was standing on end, and sent it against the concertina-player's shins.

Shadow only grinned until his jawbones cracked, without replying, and Handel pulled his red-whiskers viciously, as he longed to slap the Skeleton, but hardly dared to attempt it while Fearless Sam was in the neighborhood. He knew the detective was always prepared to defend his skinny friend in extreme cases.

"I could double you up with one twist," went on Handel, who could not resist the temptation to say something, just to relieve his mind.

"Could you?" sneered the Skeleton. "I think I could double you up in jail if I was to try."

The face of the concertina-player became as red as his whiskers at this insult, and he leaped over the trunk and fell upon the unhappy Skeleton with all his force.

Of course the Shadow fell under the weight of his adversary. Handel was rather a heavy man, and he knocked Tim Koffey down by sheer weight.

"You infernal idiots! What are yer doing?" demanded the detective, as he dragged the Skeleton from beneath Montgomery and gave that dignified concertina-player a warning kick at the same moment.

"It's that blooming bag-o'-bones! He's always up to something. He's the silliest bloke I ever see."

At this instant the colored man, Luke, strolled up to the spot and began dragging at the trunk to place it on a handcart and take it down to the wharf.

It required some strength to do this, and the concertina-player and Fearless Sam each assisted in the work.

As the trunk was heaved upon the truck the lid came partly open, and the detective directed the negro to let it alone.

"Whaffor?" asked Luke.

"Because I say so," returned the detective, sternly.

"That ain't no reason," protested Luke, doggedly, still keeping his hand on the trunk.

With a swift movement the detective caught

the negro by the collar, and swung him away several yards.

Sam was not so big as Luke, but he was astonishingly muscular; so it was no surprise to any one that he handled the negro so easily.

Luke's hand stole to his belt where a long knife was hidden by the coat he wore, but a glance from Sam's eye was enough to make him draw his hand away and walk off, muttering between his set teeth in a threatening manner.

"Sam," whispered the Skeleton.

"Wal?"

"That nigger means mischief."

"I know it."

The detective spoke in a careless tone, as he deliberately opened the trunk and examined its contents, but he kept a sidelong glance on Luke, notwithstanding.

A cursory examination of the trunk, which was the property of Merville, satisfied the detective that there was a large sum of money in it—probably the rest of the cash stolen from the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg. It will be remembered that he had already got most of it from the cave in the woods.

Here was the money; still the detective did not feel justified in taking it now, because he could not prove that it was stolen.

The Skeleton understood the situation as well as the detective, and was curious to know how Sam would proceed.

"What are you going to do, Sam?" he asked.

"Help me with this trunk. I will take it on board myself," said the detective, calmly.

Montgomery had a very hazy idea of what it all meant, but he was always ready to obey Sam. So he and the Skeleton handled the trunk, and all three shoved the handcart down to the wharf and up the gang-plank to the deck of the *Parole*.

In the mean time, Luke, after seeing what the detective was about to do, made his way into the big tent, where Leonard and Belle Howard were just performing their "leap for life," and waited until the young man descended and reached the dressing-tent.

Then, in a few words, Luke told Leonard what had been done.

The young man's dark eyes blazed with fury.

"Do you mean to say that he has taken my trunk?"

"Yes, Mas'r Leonard, that's what he done, shuah."

"That settles it. I will bring this thing to an end before to-morrow night. You understand?"

"Yes, Mas'r Leonard."

"Be within call at all times."

"Yes, Mas'r Leonard."

"You have your knife?"

The negro did not answer in words, but he stealthily drew forth his long blade, so that it flashed for an instant in the dim light of the corner of the dressing-tent where they stood.

"Good! You have a revolver?"

"Yes, Mas'r Leonard."

"Won't be afraid to use your weapons, eh? On Fearless Sam, or Canada Jack?"

A demoniacal gleam of fury in the negro's eye made the young man smile grimly. He was answered. He knew he could depend upon this fierce dark-skinned giant to the death.

"Go away now, but be within reach, in case I should want you. I do not know when I shall strike, but it will be soon," hissed Leonard.

"The sooner the better!"

"Spoiling for a fight, eh?"

"I want to pay dat Fearless Sam, and dat Canada Jack fo' wha' they done to me," growled Luke, with a scowl, as he disappeared under the flap of the tent and went outside.

"Interesting gentleman!" commented the young man. "I'm glad that Fearless Sam and Canada Jack have both abused him. He will fight for his own revenge, as well as for my interest."

"Bareback act, Leonard," growled Old Tom Elliott, in his husky tones, looking in from the big tent to make the announcement."

"All right, Tom."

"Hurry! Yours is the last act but one, and I want to get through as soon as I can," continued the manager.

"Coming," responded Leonard.

He could hear Old Tom pompously announcing that Signor Leonardi Mervilleaux would now appear in his unrivaled act of riding, barebacked, a wild steed from Tartary, and then Leonard sprung out of the dressing-tent and into the ring, smiling on every side with such grace that he captivated the hearts of several hundred young women among the audience in an instant.

How little did they suspect that this innocent "sweet-looking young man," as they mentally designated him, had murder in his heart, and was even now making plans for carrying out his crime.

Round and round the ring he went, standing on one foot, on his head, on one hand and on his shoulder, on the horse's back. He leaped to the ground and back again half a dozen times, and did all his feats with a precision and neatness that called forth salvos of applause from his delighted audience, who saw in him a model of manly beauty and strength.

He had just about finished his act, and was about to wind up with his feat of turning a triple

somerset through a hoop—a thing that is very seldom done, and that showmen who have never happened to see it often declare impossible—when he saw Belle Howard, who had just managed to finish dressing herself in her street garments, standing at the entrance to the women's dressing-tent.

She strolled out of the tent to the general dressing-tent or greenroom, where the performers generally remained when they were not in the ring, and he saw, with a pang of jealous fury, that Dale Graham was near her.

"The hound!" muttered Leonard. "He won't take my warning, and I shall have to settle him, too, before I leave this show."

He was whirling around the ring at a break-neck speed, so as to get all the impetus for his triple somerset that the movement of the horse could give him, while the clown and Old Tom were getting ready the hoop through which he was to drop after turning three times in the air.

He needed all the attention possible for his feat, but he could not keep his eyes off the girl, who was standing watching him closely from the entrance to the tent, held to some extent by that mysterious hypnotic power that he seemed to be able to exercise over her at will.

The horse was going at a fearful speed now, but Leonard stood on his back as easily as if he had been on the floor of a ball-room.

The clown brought the hoop and mounting on a box, held the hoop over his head, but where it would not interfere with the movements of the horse or his rider. The clown was an old circus man, and knew just how to hold a hoop so that the feat to be performed by Leonard would be rendered as easy as all assistance could make it.

He had been cracking old jokes and jumping about the ring, awkwardly avoiding the long lash of that whip that Old Tom Elliott cracked in the professional style, so that while it made a great noise, it did not hurt the clown. Now he asked, in a loud tone:

"What would you like, Signor Leonard?"

Leonard answered, mechanically: "A hoop."

"A hoop? Well, that's funny. Here's a hoop, right in my hand."

"Shut up!" commanded Old Tom, slashing the whip about the clown's legs. "Attend to business."

The clown howled, and the audience roared with laughter, as Leonard brought his horse to a walk while the clown indulged in a little badinage.

"Say, Mr. Elliott," cried the clown.

"Well, what is it?"

"See this hoop?"

"Yes."

"Why is this hoop like Signor Leonardi's love for a certain young woman?"

Leonard who had been quietly standing on his horse as it walked around the ring, with his eyes fixed on Belle Howard, started and glanced angrily at the clown.

Tom Elliott took no notice of this, however. He went on with the conversation, repeating the clown's question, in regular ring style:

"Why is that hoop like Signor Leonardi's love for a certain young woman?"

The clown deliberately turned on his box, and pointed first at Leonard and then at Belle Howard, as he answered:

"Because any one can see through it!"

Tom Elliott slashed at his legs again, and signed to the band to go on with the music, so that the bare-back act should have all the glory of loud music, when the clown held up his hand to stop them.

"Wait a minute. I have another one."

"You have another one? Well, out with it. Signor Leonardi wants to go on with his act, and you are wasting time."

Leonard was frowning at the clown now with an intensity that might have made that joker nervous if he had noticed it. But he did not care for anything else just then. So he went on with his question:

"Why's this hoop like Signor Leonardi's jealousy on account of that certain young woman?"

The horse was just passing the clown at this moment, and Leonard, with a low growl like that of a wild beast, aimed a vicious cuff at the clown's head.

The clown was on the alert, however, and being almost like lightning in his movements, ducked, so that Leonard's clinched fist passed over his head, only just catching one of the grotesque balls of colored wool that adorned his clown's tight-fitting white skull-cap.

The audience laughed. They thought it was part of the show, and would have been astounded to know that it was really meant, and that it would have given the clown a headache for many a day had it taken effect.

The clown did not know whether Leonard was in jest or earnest, but he had no time to figure it out then, so he proceeded with his business of howling as Old Tom Elliott sent the lash of the whip after him and repeated the words:

"Why is this hoop like Signor Leonardi's jealousy on account of that certain young woman?"

Leonard saw that Graham had stolen closer to

Belle, and was listening, with an amused look, for the answer, and if he had had a pistol about him at that moment there is little doubt that two shots would have ended the lives of Belle and her lover at once.

But he was unarmed now, of course, for a man who had to perform such a feat as a double somerset on a bare-backed horse would not be likely to incumber himself with more clothing than he could help, without thinking of a pistol.

The clown gave the answer, "Because it has no end," and Old Tom started the band without any more delay.

Away went the horse at full speed, and as the music played louder the horse seemed to move faster, and all was intense excitement.

Three times around the ring went the horse, and at the last flight up went the hoop in the experienced hands of the clown, as Leonard leaped high in the air, turned over, once, twice, thrice, and came on the horse's back through the hoop.

The leap and somerset had been splendidly done, and as Leonard rode around the ring, bowing to the plaudits of the multitude, he felt the exultation attendant upon any brilliant feat well performed, that made him for a second forget to watch Belle Howard.

Only for a second, however. Then his dark eyes turned in her direction, and his blood seethed in his veins.

Graham was close at her side, and one arm was thrown carelessly about her waist.

Like a meteor he sprung from the back of his white horse, and, bounding across the ring, he bowed once more, and then ran full tilt against Dale, forcing him into the dressing-tent.

The impetus of Leonard was such that the two young men rolled on the floor together, and Leonard sought to get a hold on his rival's throat.

"Luke!" he yelled, hoarsely.

The negro appeared, as if by magic, and comprehending the situation in an instant, had drawn his long knife, and was trying to find an opportunity to use it, when, suddenly he received a cuff on the side of his head that knocked him senseless, just as Dale managed to shake off his antagonist, and regain his feet.

"Get up, hyar, Leonard! Don't yer hear them calling fer yer?" observed the detective, as he lifted the young man to his feet and gave him a vigorous kick that landed him in the middle of the ring, where he stood bowing in such a dazed condition that he hardly knew where he was or how he came to be before the audience at all.

"Say, Dale, this hyar is er mighty good thing. I could never hev put that nigger ter sleep so neatly without it," laughed Fearless, as he showed the inside of his right hand to Dale.

"What is it, Fearless?"

"Why, d'yer see? It is a neat piece of brass covered with wash-leather, so ez to look like ther flesh of ther hand. I just hold it in my palm, and then, when I give er tough a crack with my open hand, it tells. Savy?"

"You haven't killed him, I hope."

"Not much. It will take a hangman's rope ter kill that feller. He's coming around now."

As the detective spoke Luke picked himself up, in a dazed fashion, recovered his knife from the spot where it had fallen, and made his way out of the tent, but not without a baleful glance at the detective that Sam thoroughly understood, and which would have put him on his guard even if he had not always been prepared for treachery, especially on the part of Luke and his master, Leonard Merville.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CLOSE CALL.

THE bustle of getting the rest of the show's property on board the *Parole* stopped further hostility on the part of the little knot of men who, as we have seen, had established a vendetta that meant death before it could be settled.

The discipline maintained by Old Tom Elliott was strong enough to make all his people restrain their private animosities while there was work to be done, and it will be noticed that even when Leonard Merville flew at Dale Graham in the circus tent, it was not until he had finished his bare-back act, so that the audience had no idea of the murderous assault that had nearly been consummated just inside of the dressing-tent.

Sam kept the men at work getting the things aboard, and although several times he was brought into contact with Leonard Merville, not a word was exchanged between them.

Leonard was disposed to ask him about the trunk that had been taken possession of by the detective, but decided that he could afford to wait until the boat was on the move. That something decisive was to be done soon both the detective and Leonard felt, but each was too wary to reveal any inkling of his plans to the other. In fact, Fearless Sam was rather playing a waiting game, and his course would depend largely upon what was done by Leonard.

At last all was snug, and the boat was just ready to pull out into the stream, when Old Tom announced that the boat had run out of sugar, completely.

There was a howl at once from such of the company as heard him, and numberless remarks to the effect that it would be impossible to make breakfast without sugar for coffee were heard on every side.

The concertina-player, in particular, was very much disgusted.

"This is the worst blooming country I was ever in," he declared. "Here we are in the very heart of a sugar-growing district, and no sugar for breakfast. I'll be jolly glad when I get back to England."

"Why don't you go out into the swamp there and pick enough sugar off the trees for your own use," suggested the Skeleton, with a provoking grin.

"Now, Rattlebones, don't you be so blessed funny. It don't sound well for a thin cove like you to talk to a man," answered Handel, with dignity.

"Who are you calling a rattlebones? I'd rather be thin than a red-whiskered cockney pig!" retorted the Skeleton, shaking his head till it seemed ready to roll off his shoulders.

"Shut up, bones!"

"Go and eat salt, whiskers!"

This was more than Handel Montgomery could stand, and he flew at the Skeleton with the obvious intention of breaking him in two, when Fearless Sam interfered.

"You infernal idiots! What are yer always quarreling about? You are both professional people, and you ought ter hav more dignity. See hyar, Shadow, if I hear any more of this hyar foolishness I'll shove you in a stove-pipe an' keep yer thar till yer can behave yerself."

"Good!" chuckled the concertina-player. "Good! That's what ought to be done with him."

"An' as fer you, Mr. Montgomery, I'll use your head fer kindling-wood, an' set fire ter it with yer whiskers!"

Handel Montgomery swelled with indignant rage, but he knew better than to retort to the detective, and he therefore contented himself with shaking his fist slyly at the Skeleton, but without saying another word.

"I'll hav ter go an' git some sugar. Thet's all about it," continued Fearless, addressing Old Tom. "Who can go along ter help me carry it?"

"Oh, some of the boys. Here, Luke!"

"Well," answered the negro, who had just been passing, and had caught the manager's eye at the moment.

"Go with Mr. Wilson, and help him carry some sugar."

"Yes, sah."

Fearless Sam would rather have had any one else for his companion, but he did not offer any audible objection.

Feeling in the right-hand pocket of his peajacket, to make sure that his six-shooter was ready to his hand, he skipped lightly down the gang-plank, and walked up the long, sloping bank without looking back to see whether the negro was following him.

"Wha' you gwine?" cried Luke, after a few minutes, as the detective walked up the bank so swiftly that the negro could hardly keep up with him without running.

"Ter ther storehouse at ther top of ther wharf," answered the detective, briefly, without slackening his pace.

Not another word was spoken until Sam found himself in front of an old frame building, the windows of which were closely shuttered, save one on the second floor, where a feeble glimmer seemed to indicate that some one was occupying it.

It wa a storehouse where supplies were kept for the river boats, and the keeper of it was used to being disturbed at all sorts of uncanny hours.

A few pebbles thrown at the window, and a vigorous kicking at the door, soon brought down the proprietor, who opened the door and admitted the detective and Luke into a room nearly filled with barrels, sacks and crocks, containing sugar, coffee, butter, crackers and other things needed for boat provender, while stacks of large loaves of bread were piled up on the rough counter.

Twenty-five pounds of sugar were soon purchased, and the detective motioned to the negro to take the sack and get down with it to the boat, while Sam stayed for a few minutes' conversation with the proprietor of the store.

"Who's that nigger, Sam?" asked the storekeeper, familiarly, for he had met Sam once before, and that was quite enough, in his own opinion, for him to address the detective like an old acquaintance.

"Belongs ter ther show on ther boat."

"Mean cuss!" commented the storekeeper, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Think so?"

"Kuow so."

This conversation was punctuated by the storekeeper biting off a huge mouthful from a plug of tobacco, while the detective, who was always interested in queer characters, looked at him ad-

miringly as a specimen of humanity that he would like to have in a museum, and show to the people of large cities.

"Why do you think he's er mean cuss?" asked the detective, after a pause.

"His color?"

"Color?"

"Yes. Muddy brown."

"Ah!"

"Niggers muddy brown nearly always mean."

"I'll look out fer niggers that are muddy brown after this," observed the detective, with a smile.

"You'd better. Specially when they look at you out of the corners of their eyes, like that one."

"Thanks fer ther pointer," and Sam turned to leave the store. "Good-night."

The detective had taken a step or two outside in the darkness, when the storekeeper followed him to the door, so that his figure showed in sharp relief against the brightness within.

"Say?" he cried, hoarsely.

"Wal?"

"Mind what I told you, Samuel!"

"I will."

"All right. Good-night."

The storekeeper shut his door and the detective heard him bolt it in the inside. Then he walked briskly down the wharf toward the river.

The night was very dark, and contrasted with the light within the store, the wharf was so black that for a dozen steps or so he did not know where he was walking. He could not distinguish anything but what seemed like a black wall.

"Wonder where that feller, Luke, is," he muttered. "Muddy brown and look out of the corners of their eyes. There is er good deal of hard common sense in what that feller back thar says. Wal, I always do look out fer ther nigger, so ther advice is nothing new to me."

By this time his eyes, being accustomed to the gloom, he could just distinguish the water rippling below, and could make out a large pile of railroad ties that he remembered to have seen on his way up the wharf.

"We came up close to them," he said to himself. "They make er good guide ter ther boat. I can't see anything of ther Parole, but I know she's down thar somewhere."

He walked along, trying to see Luke, but the negro was not to be discerned anywhere on the wharf.

"Guess he must hav reached ther boat an' gone aboard with ther sugar. I suppose they won't go until I get down."

He uttered these words as he was abreast of the ties.

Then he stumbled over something soft, on the ground, and nearly fell. He managed to save himself, however, and at the same time saw that the something soft was the sack of sugar.

He had hardly time to wonder where Luke had gone, when a hand clutched him by the left arm and something stung him in the shoulder.

Fearless Sam was a quick thinker.

He knew in an instant that his assailant was Luke, and with a muttered "Muddy brown, sure enough," he grasped the hand that held the knife and placed the muzzle of his revolver against the negro's forehead.

"Move er hair's breadth or even breathe, and I'll blow yer brains out!" he hissed, fiercely. "Drop that knife!"

Luke did not move.

"Drop that knife!" repeated the detective, still more sternly.

"What knife?" asked the negro, doggedly. "Who's got a knife?"

The baleful look out of the corner of his eye was fixed upon the detective's face, but at last it dropped before Sam's steady gaze.

"Did ye hear me?" said the detective.

The muzzle of the pistol was now pressed so hard against the negro's forehead that it sunk into the flesh.

With a muttered oath, the negro opened his right hand and the big knife rattled on the stones of the wharf.

The detective kicked it away, and then commanded, in a voice that meant business:

"Pick up that sack of sugar!"

"No!" shouted Luke, recklessly. "I ain't gwine ter wo'k fo' you no more. Carry your own sugar!"

"Pick up that sack of sugar!" repeated the detective, with a dangerous calmness.

The negro hesitated, but, something in the detective's manner was too much for him, and he grudgingly stooped and raised the heavy sack to his shoulder.

"Now trot ter ther boat!"

Luke did not answer, but he marched sullenly down the wharf, with the sugar on his shoulder, while the detective, after picking up the big knife, and carrying it in his left hand, his right still holding his trusty six-shooter, followed him down to the water's edge.

The gang-plank was thrown out, and Luke and Sam walked to the lower deck.

The negro carried the sugar aft to the cook-house, and the detective turned toward the cap-

tain and told him to send the boat straight out to the middle of the river.

"What for?" asked Old Tom Elliott, who had heard this request with some wonderment, for the detective did not often concern himself about the direction of the boat.

"I'll show yer directly, if ther captain will do what I ask."

"Sart'ly, Fearless," put in the captain, a rough-and-ready river man, with whom the detective was a particular favorite.

He gave the necessary signals to the pilot, and the Parole backed away to the middle of the great river.

It had just reached a spot that was about an equal distance from either shore, when Luke slouched forward, looking cornerwise out of his eyes for Merville.

"Come hyar, Luke," commanded the detective, in the tone that the negro knew must not be disobeyed.

He shuffled toward Fearless Sam, who was standing on the port side, close to the edge of the boat, where there was no guard-rail, to prevent a careless person falling overboard.

The detective and Luke looked at each other for a moment, ere Sam observed, in a good-humored manner:

"You are a nice colored gentleman, ain't yer?"

"Deed, I think I'se good as any other man."

"Do yer? Wal, you are too good fer this boat, I think!"

Then, with a swift movement, the detective seized Luke around the waist, and with a mighty effort, threw him far out in the dark river.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MIDNIGHT DUEL.

The act was so sudden that no one knew what the detective was going to do.

The first intimation Old Tom or the captain had that there was any danger threatening Luke was when they heard the splash and saw Sam standing at the edge of the boat watching the place where the negro's head had disappeared.

"What's ther trouble, Fearless?" asked Old Tom.

The detective pulled off his coat and showed that his shirt-sleeve was stained with blood.

"He cut me," he said, coolly, "and I'm gettin even."

"Crikey!" observed Handel Montgomery. "That was a nice throw, Samivel. I couldn't have done it better myself. I'm blowed if I could."

"You couln't throw a baby overboard," piped the Skeleton, who had silently joined the group.

The interest in Luke's fate was too great to permit of the concertina-player carrying on his feud with the Skeleton just then, so he contented himself with a freezing look, and then gave all his attention to the river, watching for Luke to reappear.

"Blow me tight!" he exclaimed, delightedly.

"There he is. Don't the blooming rascal swim!"

The negro's head could just be distinguished bobbing up some yards from the boat, when the detective took deliberate aim with his revolver at the water about a foot from the negro's head and pulled the trigger.

Crack!

The negro dived like a duck, and Handel rubbed his hands in enjoyment of the scene.

"Don't you want him aboard again?" asked Old Tom?"

"No," answered the detective, shortly. "Do you?"

"Not I. There's a week's wages coming to him, but he can collect them some other time."

Old Tom laughed heartily at this joke. It was all the more enjoyable because he was getting the best of a bargain with Luke.

"Keep ther boat steady," requested Sam of the captain.

"Sartainly," responded the captain, with a grin.

The negro stayed under water for a long time, but he was compelled to come to the surface to breathe after a while, and the detective sent another shot near enough to make him dodge and go under again.

Handel's enjoyment of the fun was intense.

"Let me have a shot at him, Fearless?" he said.

But, the detective would not allow it.

"Your aim might not be good enough, and I don't want ter kill ther poor wretch," returned the detective, as he sent another shot into the vicinity of the bobbing head, that was now some distance from the boat and moving toward the shore.

The clouds had now dispersed to a considerable extent, and there was moonlight, as well as starlight now, to enable the detective to see his mark.

"No one would trust you with a gun, you know, Handel," observed the Skeleton. "You'd be shooting off those whiskers of yours the first thing we'd know. Though that would improve your appearance, certainly, come to think of it."

"I'd like to throw you after the blooming nigger," growled the concertina-player. Only I wouldn't want to drown even such a contemptible object as you. And I'm afraid a bone would not float."

"Bah!" growled the Skeleton, who was too mad to say anything else.

Luke turned away, with a concluding shake of his fist, and disappeared behind the pile of railroad ties, as he walked up the wharf.

"So much for Luke!" exclaimed the Skeleton, with a chuckle.

"I'll see him again," muttered the detective, as he rolled up his shirt-sleeve, and satisfied himself that the wound from the negro's knife was a mere trifle, not worth, in his estimation, even the solace of a bandage.

He pulled down his sleeve and put on his peacock, and turned to find himself face to face with—Leonard Merville.

"Sam Wilson, you are a coward!" hissed Leonard, livid with suppressed rage.

"Indeed? Why?"

"You threw that poor colored man overboard, and then half-drowned him in your attempts to murder him."

"Ah!"
"Yes, I saw you."
"Did you?"

"Yes, and I am prepared to settle that matter with you now, if you are ready. This boat is not big enough for both of us."

The others had moved away, the Skeleton and Handel Montgomery having gone to their bunks, while the captain had invited Old Tom into the pilot house for a chat and smoke while he took a trick at the wheel.

The detective looked around him, and saw that he was alone with the young man.

"Leonard," he said, calmly.
"Go on."

"You say truly that this boat is not big enough for both of us, and I promise you that by this time to-morrow one of us will not be aboard of of it."

"Which one?"
"That remains to be seen."
"What do you mean?" asked Leonard, eagerly.

"I'll tell you to-morrow."

"I cannot wait till to-morrow, and I propose that this thing shall be settled within half an hour."

"In what way?"
"You must come ashore with me, and fight me with pistol or knife, whichever you choose," hissed the young man, savagely, as he bit his thin lips until the blood came.

"You're a fool, Leonard Merville," returned the detective, with more show of feeling than was usual with him.

The young man raised his hand as if he could have struck the other in the face, but the detective, with a contemptuous laugh, seized the hand with an iron grasp, and forced it to his side.

"You don't think you could do anything with me in that way, do yer? I thought I'd shown yer that you would be helpless in my hands if I chose ter exert my strength."

Leonard did not answer, and the detective, still with the contemptuous smile curling his lip, went on:

"A man fights a duel with his equals—"

"Do you mean to say I'm not your equal?" broke in Leonard, in a fury.

"That's what I mean ter say," returned the detective, provokingly.

"In what way?"
"In many ways. In the first place, although I throw niggers overboard, I do not try ter kill young girls."

The young man winced.
"Moreover, I don't think you are much of a man from any point of view. A man that would attack a woman and try to break her neck is not much good for anything else."

"I'm good enough to fight with you."

"I don't think so."

For an instant Leonard looked into the detective's eyes with an expression of devilish hate. Then, before Sam knew what he was about to do, the young man's hand shot out, and he caught the detective's nose between his finger and thumb, giving it a wrench that made the tears come into Sam's eye, and caused him to utter a cry of pain, involuntarily.

The detective aimed a blow at Leonard's face, but the young man was prepared, and warded off the blow as he leaped back out of reach.

"Now, will you fight me?" he panted.

"Yes," answered the detective, with a quiet determination that Leonard knew meant mischief.

The young man smiled with an air of triumph. He felt that he had gained one victory, however the duel might result.

"Follow me," he said. "I will get the skiff that we used once before, on a certain occasion. We can easily pull ashore in it, and the one that survives should be equal to rowing back by himself."

This cold-blooded suggestion agreed with the detective's humor, so he only nodded as he followed Leonard aft to where the skiff was trailing along in the wake of the steamer.

The Parole was running at half speed, for there was plenty of time to reach the next

stand, and there was no use in wasting steam. It was an easy matter, therefore, to cast off the skiff, and the two men sent the boat flying across the dark waters in long jerks as they bent to the oars. Leonard was pulling stroke, so that he sat in front of the detective. Fearless Sam had had too much experience with the young man to trust him.

The clouds, that had rolled away and allowed the moon to light up the scene to some extent, had again gathered, thicker than ever, and it was impossible to distinguish anything more than a few yards from the boat, while on the shore the darkness was absolutely impenetrable.

The keel of the boat grated on the sandy bottom at last, and the detective leaped lightly ashore, and pulled the skiff up the bank.

"Now, Leonard," he said. "Where is this thing ter be done?"

"It is too dark to see what we are doing, I'm afraid," answered the young man. "But if we use bowie-knives, I suppose we can feel to kill each other."

"We shall not use bowie-knives," observed the detective, calmly, but decidedly.

"Why not?"
"Because I, as ther challenged party, have ther right ter choose weapons, an' I choose pistols."

Merville laughed, contemptuously.

"It will be an easy matter for either of us to keep out of range in this thick darkness. I suppose that is what you want."

There was something so irritating in Merville's laugh and cool, sneering manner that the detective found himself taking off his hat, so that he could wipe his bald head on the silk handkerchief before referred to.

Neither could see the other, but the sound of their voices told them that they were only a few feet apart.

"See byar, Leonard. This is what we'll do, and we'll do it right hyar. Hev yer a cigar in yer pocket?"

"Yes."
"Wal, light it."
"What for?"

"Light your cigar, and I'll light another. Then we'll step twenty paces away from each other, and fire till one of us drops. See?"

"Not exactly. What are the cigars for?"

"To guide our aim. We'll smoke all through ther fight, and ther light of ther cigars will tell us whar to aim."

"I understand."

Leonard took a cigar from his pocket, and as he lighted it the detective saw that there was a frown of murderous determination upon his countenance.

Sam Wilson lighted a cigar, too, and puffed away vigorously.

"Now, Leonard, come here."

The answer was a shot from a revolver that passed dangerously close to the detective's ear.

"Thet's dirty, Leonard. I wouldn't do that again."

"It was an accident," replied the young acrobat. "I was feeling the trigger, and it went off."

"Bah! I don't believe yer. But, never mind. Stand right whar yer are. Thet's just about twenty paces. It's near enough. We are not splitting hairs. Let her go."

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Four shots were fired in quick succession, and then the combatants stopped for an instant as if by mutual consent.

"This is great shooting, Leonard," observed Fearless.

The answer was another shot. The bullet went through the broad brimmed hat of the detective.

Fearless Sam looked steadily at the red light of Leonard's cigar, that seemed to float in the blackness, and taking steady aim, fired at it.

Out went the red light, as, at the same instant the detective threw his own cigar to the ground.

"Just what I thought," muttered Sam. "He has one of those long cigars, and he has been holding it sideways so as to deceive my aim. Wal, I've knocked it out of his mouth, anyhow."

"That was a pretty good shot," said Leonard. "You will have to wait till I light another cigar."

"Go ahead."

There was silence for a few moments; and then, just as the detective felt the cold muzzle of a pistol thrust against his cheek, it was knocked away, exploding as it did so, as the voice of Canada Jack cried:

"What made you trust that miserable skunk, Sam?"

"I was a fool to do it," responded the detective. "But, I thought I would give him a lesson and a chance to show his courage at the same time."

"Well; it's a good job the Skeleton and I came ashore in that little skiff just when we did. I ran up against the two of you in the dark, and it was more by luck than judgment that I managed to knock his gun away."

"Don't be afraid now, Fearless," piped the Skeleton. "I am here."

The detective was about to reply, when splash of oars was heard in the river.

"Jump fer t'other boat and pull. He's making er break ter get away!" yelled the detective, as he ran down to the large skiff, in which he and Leonard had come ashore, and, hardly giving Canada Jack and the Skeleton time to get in, began to pull with all his might for the spot where the splashing of the oars and the loud breathing of Leonard Merville told them he was rowing with all his strength.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE TOILS AT LAST.

"TAKE one of these oars, Jack," said the detective, when he had rowed for several minutes, without coming up with the lighter skiff propelled by Merville.

Canada Jack silently stepped over the intervening seats and seized the bow oar, pulling with the carelessness and apparent readiness to accept whatever came along that was characteristic of him.

The Skeleton sat in the stern and kept the boat straight. He can hardly be said to have steered, for Sam was doing that himself with his oar.

"Hold on," warned the detective.

Canada Jack stopped rowing.

"Thet feller has got away, sure. I can't hear him. Wal, he's left his trunk, anyhow, an' if I get ther money back fer ther bank, I suppose they will be satisfied. But I did hope ter stop his gallop altogether, this time."

The detective spoke resignedly, but it could be detected from his tone, that he was very much disappointed.

"Where are we going, Fearless?" asked the Skeleton.

"To the Parole, if we can find her."

"There she is, over to your right," returned the Skeleton. "I can see her lights."

"Guess you are right, Skeleton. Wait a minute, Canteda. Durned if I don't feel hot, in more ways than one."

Fearless Sam removed his hat and shoved a finger ruefully through the hole made by Leonard Merville's bullet. Then he drew out his red silk handkerchief and rubbed his polished bald-head viciously, as if he must find some outlet for his feelings, at any cost.

Canada Jack did not make any comment. He knew that Fearless Sam was mad and disappointed, but there would be no sense in talking about it. So he followed his usual custom, and kept his mouth shut.

Ten minutes' rowing brought them up to the side of the Parole, that was slowly drifting down the river, the captain having stopped the engines altogether.

The Skeleton had pulled himself aboard, and Canada Jack was about to follow when he suddenly stopped, and, touching the detective on the shoulder, said:

"See?"

"What?"

"Just back of the wheel."

"Je-rusalem!"

The detective hastily climbed to the deck of the Parole, and ran along until he was abaft the great side-wheel. Then he looked over the side and began hauling on a rope.

"Sure enough!" he muttered. "Wal, if he isn't er daisy!"

"The rope was attached to the little skiff in which Leonard Merville had rowed away, and the water in the bottom as well as on the blades of the oars, indicated that it had only just been vacated by the young man.

"What d'yer think of it, Canada?" asked Fearless, as Jack stood at his side.

"I think that you will have all you can do to catch this fellow asleep. He is a terror."

The detective walked slowly up-stairs to the main cabin, and as he did so noted that there was bright light in the saloon partitioned off at the rear, and that there were voices, as if a social party were in progress.

He walked along, and pushing open the door, could not repress a start at the sight that met his eyes.

Seated at a small table were Old Tom Elliot, Handel Montgomery, Dale Graham and—Leonard Merville, all deeply engrossed in a game of draw-poker!

Leonard was facing the door, and, as the detective entered, closely followed by Canada Jack and the Skeleton, the young man looked into his face with an expression of innocent unconcern, that the detective mentally set down as the very perfection of acting.

"Thet feller is such er treat that I can almost forgive him fer being er rascal," he muttered.

The game was not stopped by the appearance of the three new-comers. Leonard was dealing, and he gave out the cards without a tremor of the fingers suggesting that he was embarrassed by the appearance of the man with whom he had fought a duel half an hour before, or of the other men who had arrived just in time to prevent his taking a treacherous advantage of his antagonist.

There were several piles of greenbacks on the table, the largest heap being at the elbow of Handel Montgomery, and the next largest in

possession of Leonard Merville. The customary chips were being used, but it appeared as if the money was kept on the table to promote confidence in the bosoms of the players that there was money to cash in all the chips that could be produced.

The detective, Canada Jack and the Skeleton drew a little closer to the table, without speaking, the players not making any sign of recognition.

A minute's observation informed the detective that the stakes were high, and that Leonard Merville was winning.

His long, slim fingers handled the cards delicately, and he seemed to make them flutter, so swiftly did he deal them and shuffle them.

"What do yer think of it, Canada?" whispered Fearless Sam.

"He's too slick for his company. I could not do it better myself, I don't believe," answered the grafter, in the same low tone, "and I have been making a living out of cards and such things all my life."

"Who's ther pigeon, d'yer think?"

"That poor wretch of an Englishman, Handel, I guess."

"Glad of it," put in the Skeleton, who had caught the last observation. "He thinks he's so smart that he deserves to be plucked. I hope they won't leave a feather on him."

"Shut up, Shad!" commanded the detective, in a sterner tone than he generally used to the Skeleton.

The playing was going on, and now there was some fierce betting going on between Montgomery and Merville.

There was a large pile of money in the center of the table, for the two men had discarded chips now, and were using money instead."

"I'll see that thousand and go it two thousand better," Handel said as he brought out a number of greenbacks from his pocket and piled them up in the center. He was flushed, but determined.

Leonard Merville, pale and composed laughed as he said: "I'll make it five thousand," at the same time putting the money down in thousand dollar bills!

"Curse him!" muttered Fearless Sam. "Whar did he get that money, I wonder? I'll hev er nice job with him when I do put the nippers on him fer good."

Handel Montgomery pulled his red whiskers and looked doubtful for a moment, Leonard watching him like a hawk the while. At last, with a sigh, he pulled out ten thousand dollar bills, and said: "Ten."

"Twenty!"

"Thirty!"

"Forty!"

Merville was smiling like a handsome fiend, as he said, slowly:

"You cannot bluff me, Mr. Montgomery. Fifty!"

"This is getting interesting," whispered Jack to the detective. "Fifty thousand dollars is a neat sum to be bet on one hand of poker."

"Wait a minute and watch," answered the detective, in a whisper.

"I'll cover your fifty," said Montgomery in a fever of excitement that made him shout the words, as he placed the money on the table. "It's all I have. Now, show your cards!"

With the same demoniacal grin, Merville threw down four aces, simultaneously with Montgomery laying down four kings.

The concertina-player clasped his hands to his forehead with a gesture of despair that made even the Skeleton Dude feel a thrill of pity, much as he disliked the red-whiskered Englishman.

"It's—it's all I have!" murmured Handel, in a dreamy tone, as if he hardly realized the full sense of his loss. "You see, it makes a cove feel rather shaky, when he loses all his bloom'in' coin. And—and—I expected to get back to the old country this year. Crikey! This is 'ard—very 'ard!"

But no one noticed him particularly.

Merville, still with the devilish smile raising his mustache and curling his thin lip, reached across the table for the pile of greenbacks, when Dale Graham, who, with Old Tom Elliott, had been sitting as eager, but silent witnesses of the exciting play that had ended in the bankruptcy of Montgomery, thrust forth his hand and seized Leonard by the wrist.

"Hold!" he cried, in a voice intense with excitement.

Merville twisted his wrist out of the other's grasp, as he said contemptuously:

"You are crazy!"

"You are a—"

Whatever Dale was going to say was stopped by the detective, who clasped his hand over the speaker's mouth in an imperious manner that Graham never resisted, any more than did others who were brought into contact with Fearless.

"Never mind about finishing what you were going to say. Gentlemen do not talk in that way," observed the detective, with a meaning smile.

"All right, Fearless. But, I should like to explain how I came to be sitting here playing

cards with a man I despise," returned the young man, impetuously.

"You have not been playing since I came in, so I'll suppose you were not in the game," responded the detective.

"But I was. He has taunted me so much, and it has seemed so impossible to get satisfaction from him, that I agreed to play a game with him, the loser of a certain sum of money to give up all claim to Belle Howard."

"Bad!"

"Yes, I know it is. But if you had heard how he taunted me, you would not be surprised that I agreed to the arrangement. I felt sure that the justice of my cause must make me prevail."

"How does the game stand between you now?"

"Even."

"Wal, let it go at that. Leonard Merville."

"Yes," said the young man, coolly.

"I'll play this game out with you."

"You?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Oh, nothing. Only I did not think you spent your time on cards. I did not know that you could play poker at all."

The sneer was still on Merville's face, and he looked at the detective with a cool contempt that would have maddened any man with less control over himself than Fearless Sam.

The detective did not take any notice, however, but took the seat that Montgomery surrendered to him.

The others watched the game with the greatest eagerness, Canada Jack, in particular, being prepared to catch every point in the game, with the eye of an expert.

For half an hour the game went on between the two men, the detective winning so often that he had a large portion of his adversary's pile at his hand.

Montgomery watched the playing with a sad, dreamy, far-away expression in his eyes, as he saw that the money being passed over by Leonard Merville to the detective was that which he (Handel) had so often gloated over in the trunk.

At last there was a large pile in the middle of the table, and by rapid betting it was increased till it reached forty thousand dollars.

"Now, show what you have," suddenly cried Sam.

Merville was taken somewhat by surprise. He could not help a slight start, but the start was seen by the detective, as he kept his eyes fixed on those of his adversary, and waited for him to show his hand.

Merville fumbled a little with his cards, and then threw down four aces.

Like a flash of lightning, Sam had the muzzle of his revolver within an inch of Leonard's face.

"Don't stir, or I'll drill a hole in you before you can speak!" hissed the detective, in a low tone, while the others waited to see the outcome of this strange proceeding.

"Canada," went on the detective, without removing his eyes from those of Merville.

"Yes."

"Step around there and turn his right hand palm upward."

Calmly and without replying Jack obeyed.

In the palm of his hand, held there dexterously by the contraction of the muscles, was a deuce of spades.

Merville had held an ace there, and when he was fumbling with his cards before throwing them upon the table he had changed the ace for the deuce, and kept the smaller one in his hand, while using the ace to enable him to win the money on the table.

He had done it by the simple trick known as "palming," an accomplishment by which Prof. Herrman and other well-known professional magicians perform most of their apparently miraculous tricks with cards.

"That will do, Canada. Just stay thar a moment. Now, Handel, take ther money you lost off thar table."

Merville made a slight movement, but the cold muzzle of the pistol touched his face and warned him to remain quiet, as Canada placed his hand on the young man's shoulder, while still holding the hand with the deuce of spades in its palm with the other.

Montgomery, with a grin on his countenance that contrasted well with the look of misery it had worn before, grabbed at the notes, and in an incredibly short time had gathered up fifty thousand dollars.

"Thet all, Handel?" asked the detective.

"That's all."

"Wal, take it and get out. You had better turn into yer bunk an' stay thar. An' ef you'll take my advice, you won't try ter fool with ther great American game of poker again. It's er sure loser fer ther man thar plays er straight game. An' even ther feller who is crooked gets called down at last, as you can see in this case."

He nodded toward Merville, who scowled in return, and Handel retired, hugging his money to his bosom, with the firm resolve to take the detective's advice, and never be induced to touch a card again as long as he lived.

"Dale, what did be win from you?"

"Nothing."

"And you, governor?" to Old Tom Elliott.

"Oh, only a few dollars, and he's welcome to them. I guess he got them on the square, because there ain't a man living that can do me up at cards," returned Old Tom, who would rather lose a fortune than admit that any one was sharper than himself.

"Well, now that you have arranged everything to your own satisfaction, perhaps you will let me pick up my money and leave," said Leonard.

"Not so fast, my young friend. I hev something against you, and I propose to hold this money in trust until certain matters are cleared up, d'yer see?"

The eyes of Merville blazed with fury.

"By what right do you do this?" he demanded.

"Plenty of right," returned the detective, calmly: "I am a detective in the employ of the Secret Service of the United States."

Leonard interrupted him with a laugh.

"What is that to do with me? I have not committed any crime against the United States. And if I had done anything against State laws elsewhere—as I am told you think I have—you cannot arrest me in the State of Mississippi without a warrant."

"Indeed? You seem ter know er great deal erbout ther law. Wal, let me tell you thet I hold er commission as detective under the Governor of Mississippi."

Merville's scowl grew darker than ever, as he began to think that perhaps he was trapped, after all.

"I don't care for that," he said, with an air of bravado. "Where is your warrant?"

The detective drew a paper from his coat pocket and waved it in the face of the young man, as he exclaimed:

"Here is my warrant," and, dexterously slipping a pair of handcuffs on Merville's wrists, "here is my authority!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

"THIS is going to be tiresome to me," exclaimed Old Tom, when he saw that the detective had determined to bring to a close his long chase for Leonard Merville.

"Why?"

"He's the most useful man I have in the ring," grumbled the manager. "And I don't see any chance of getting any one to fill his place unless I can strike some one in New Orleans, and even if I do that I've got to wriggle along till we reach there."

"You can make any use of me that you please," suggested the Skeleton, with a propitiatory smirk.

Mr. Koffey had enough confidence in his own abilities to believe honestly that he could do anything in the show that any one else could do, even to the "leap for life" or taming old Monarch, the big lion.

Old Tom did not answer him, therefore, knowing that he meant well, but turned toward Fearless Sam for some solution of the difficulty.

"Thar's no need fer Shad ter go inter ther ring," observed the detective. "Hyar's Dale Graham, who's never had er good chance. He's been practicing pretty hard, as I know, an' thar is no reason why he shouldn't do everything 'cept, perhaps, fool with Old Monarch."

Graham's face flushed with eagerness.

"I can do even that, if necessary. He knows me pretty well, and I have been putting him through his tricks for the last few weeks."

Old Tom scratched his head doubtfully, while Merville, who had regained his customary composure, smiled in enjoyment of the perplexity caused by the turn his affairs had taken.

"Better let me go with the show till we strike New Orleans," he suggested, with as much coolness as if the outcome did not concern him personally in the least.

"Wal, then, you'll use Dale Graham, will yer?" urged the detective to Old Tom, without heeding the words of Leonard Merville.

"I s'pose that's all I can do," answered Old Tom, mournfully.

"I told you that I would do anything," put in the Skeleton. "If you want me to do the leap for life with Miss Howard, you have only to say so."

Tim Koffey looked so ridiculous, with his thin arms and legs, and his cadaverous face, with the beard and mustache waxed to points, as usual, that Old Tom could not help laughing outright.

"What are you laughing at?" demanded the Skeleton, wrathfully. "Do you think I couldn't do it? You ought to know that the thin, wiry man has often more strength, and always more agility, than the stout fellow, all the world over."

"That's so," observed Canada Jack, gravely.

The Skeleton Dude immediately shook hands with Canada Jack, with a great deal of warmth.

"Canada, you are the most sensible man in this whole outfit. That is what you are!"

"Thanks."

"I beg your pardon, Shadow," said Old Tom. "I wasn't laughing at you. One of the clown's new jokes that he got off yesterday just struck

me. I never could see the point of it before, and I had to laugh when it hit me just now."

The Skeleton Dude looked at the manager doubtfully, but as Old Tom had thoroughly recovered his gravity now, he felt constrained to accept the explanation. So he shook hands with the manager in a very impressive manner, that almost made Old Tom burst into a guffaw again.

"Canada," said the detective, "just lead Mr. Merville back thar ter ther animal cages. Thar's thet one thet we hev ready for ther lions we are ter git in New Orleans. Clap him in thar, and fasten the padlock, an' he'll be safe enough."

"Shall I take the bracelets off him?"

"Not at present. He's too handy at picking locks, an' I don't think er padlock would hold out against him long if he had ther use of his hands."

Merville smiled contemptuously, but followed Jack tractably enough, rather to the surprise of Sam, who took the precaution to walk behind him, pistol in hand, with the Skeleton by his side, who enjoyed the importance of the occasion immensely.

"Throw in some straw," suggested the detective when Canada had placed his prisoner in the cage and was busy at the padlock, which fastened with a spring.

Old Tom handed the key of the padlock to the detective, taking it from a huge bunch that he carried in his coat pocket, and the strong iron cage was opened so that Canada Jack could throw in a good-sized bundle of straw.

"How long am I to stay in this place?" asked Leonard, as the three moved away.

"Depends on circumstances," answered Wilson, carelessly.

"Does, eh?" muttered Leonard, under his breath. "Well, maybe the circumstances won't be just what you expect."

He threw himself upon a bed of straw, which was soft and comfortable enough, and was asleep in two minutes.

Meanwhile something was going on within a few yards of him which would have surprised him had he known anything about it.

The cages were well at the back of the boat, as the reader will remember. Immediately in front of him was Monarch, walking restlessly up and down, and occasionally emitting a low growl, as he longed, perhaps, to be rampaging over the dark country that he could just see on each side of the river.

As Merville threw himself upon his straw, a dark face appeared above the edge of the deck from the river and tried to peer into the darkness, so as to distinguish what was there.

It was very dark, although a lantern here and there made "the darkness visible," as it were.

The detective, Old Tom and Shadow had gone, and were turning into their bunks, with the determination of not troubling any one till morning was well advanced.

Even Parole itself was resting. As stated before, the engine was not working, so that the great paddle-wheels were still, allowing the boat to drift lazily down the wide river, while the pilot in the wheel-house on the hurricane deck kept the boat straight by a few touches of the helm once in a while.

The whole scene was one of peace and security.

The dark face remained where it was for perhaps half a minute, as the eyes moved to and fro like those of a wild animal that fears to run into ambush.

Then, with a quick, but noiseless, movement, the face was followed by the rest of a man's body, which crouched down under the side of the boat.

But the deck hands were all fast asleep, and the canvasmen and other laborers belonging to the circus had been working too hard the day before to be awake when they were not required for anything.

The stranger, whoever he was, need not fear interruption unless he made an unusual noise.

He moved swiftly forward until he stood where one of the dim lanterns cast its light full into his face and revealed him to be—the negro, Luke!

"Sho', I wish I knew whar young Mas'r Leonard is. Cain't do nothin' without him, now," he muttered, as he shivered involuntarily, for his clothes were soaking with water.

He stepped in front of Old Monarch's cage, and the lion, apparently resenting the familiarity, threw himself with all his might against the iron bars, with one claw outside, uttering a desperate growl at the same time.

The claw just touched Luke's shirt—for he wore no coat—and inflicted a slight scratch on his arm.

He flew back as if he were shot, and the movement brought him with a bang against the cage in which lay Merville, fast asleep.

With another exclamation of alarm, the negro sprang away from this cage, too, and stood under the lantern, panting.

"Sho!" he exclaimed. "I'se nervous. It's 'cause I'se tired, with being in the water so long, I guess. I done swim a good deal since dat

Fearless Sam threw me in de ribber. Wonder wha's in dat other cage over there, anyhow."

Cautiously he approached the cage in which Leonard Merville was still peacefully sleeping, and looked through the bars, with the aid of the dim lantern, that he had removed from its nail to aid him in his investigations.

"Fo' de Lawd! It's a man!" he cried, in irrepressible astonishment. "An' he's locked in, too. Wonder who it is?"

Leonard had thrown his arm over his face, and was lying with his back to the bars, so that it was impossible to see who it was.

"I done gwine to find out who dat man is befo' I go 'way from hyar," muttered Luke, who had a slight suspicion that it might be the young man for whom he would be willing to lay down his life.

He tried to reach the sleeping figure with his hand, but his arm was not long enough. Then he saw a long-handled fork, that was used to place the meat in the cages of the dangerous wild beasts, and he saw how he could use it in this case.

Pushing the handle into the cage, he gave Leonard a gentle prod, and then, as that had no effect, a harder one.

The young man started angrily to his feet.

"Well, what's going on?" he demanded.

"Oh, fo' de Lawd! It's you, Mas'r Leonard. It's you, cooped up in dat there way, like a hog."

"Stop your howling," commanded Leonard. "Where have you come from this time?"

"Out of de ribber, Mas'r Leonard."

"So I should think, from your appearance. Well, you see the fix I am in."

The negro raised his eyes and hands, and was about to break into fresh lamentations, but Leonard stopped him.

"Never mind about squealing any more. I want you to get me out of this right away."

"Shuah, Mas'r Leonard. What else would I do?"

"All right," interrupted Leonard, testily, and not at all impressed with the fidelity of the negro, apparently. "This is what you have to do. Listen to me."

"I'se listening, Mas'r Leonard."

"You know where Fearless Sam's state-room is? Curse him?"

"Yes. Cuss him!"

"Go to his room, and get his keys. Then go to his trunk, that is in his room, and take out all the money you find there. The money is mine, that he robbed me of, just now, and I'm going to have it."

"Shuah, Mas'r Leonard."

"The key of this padlock is of brass, and the top of it is of a peculiar shape, like an 'S.' Make sure it is on the bunch, and get back as quickly as you can, so as to let me out of this place."

"Shuah, Mas'r Leonard. But—what de matter with yo' han's? Are dem handcuffs?"

"Yes. The handcuff key I always carry is in my hip pocket, so that I can't get at it. Take it out and unlock these things."

Leonard turned his back to the bars, and the negro reached into his hip pocket, took out a handcuff key, and in a moment had the handcuffs off.

"That's all right, Luke. Now, hurry. But, be careful. That fellow sleeps with one eye open most of the time, I believe."

With his obedient "Yes, Mas'r Leonard," the negro sped away, only anxious to please his young master, and caring little for himself, so that Merville Leonard were saved.

He knew the Parole so well that it was no trouble to him to find Fearless Sam's state-room on the main deck, above, where it was, as the reader will remember, across the corridor from that occupied by Belle Howard.

The door was unlocked, for a wonder, although an ordinary lock would not have stopped Luke very long.

Softly he pushed open the door, and saw, by the lighted lantern that hung from the ceiling, that Fearless Sam was lying on his back on his bed, fast asleep.

Noiselessly the negro stepped across the narrow space between the door and the bunk, and reached toward the detective's coat, that hung above his head. Putting his hand into one of the deep inside pockets, he felt a knife, which, as soon as he had drawn it out, he recognized as his own, that Fearless Sam had taken from him on the wharf.

Luke grinned from ear to ear as he placed the weapon in his belt, and felt in the other pockets of the coat for the keys.

"Hyar's his revolver! I won't take that. I'se afraid of it," he thought. "It 'ud bring me bad luck, shuah!"

He felt in another pocket, and smiled as he felt the keys.

"Hyar they are. Wonder if the brass key is hyar."

He would have preferred to take the keys and get out, but he dared not disobey orders.

He looked carefully through the bunch, and saw that the brass key was absent.

"Guess I'd better get the money 'fore I look for the brass key," muttered Luke.

He easily picked out the trunk key, because he had seen it many times before in Fearless

Sam's hand and recognized it at once. Opening the trunk, he saw the money lying just inside, tied up in bundles of greenbacks of large denominations, and it did not take him long to clear out all the bills and stuff them into his pockets and inside his shirt, until he was well padded with money.

"The bills will get wet," he muttered, with a grin, "but I dunno but what wet money is as good as dry, anyhow."

This part of his task done, but not without many a cautious look at the detective, peacefully slumbering in his berth, the negro stole over to the bed to try and find the brass key that would mean liberty for his master.

Something seemed to assure Luke that the key was under the pillow of Fearless Sam, and it was there that he looked for it.

With a gliding motion, like that of a snake, the negro's hand, slid under the pillow, with the detective breathing steadily within a few inches of his face the while, until he felt something hard, that he knew, instinctively, was the key he sought.

More cautiously than ever, he pulled away at the key, and at last had the satisfaction of holding it in his hand.

He could not repress a chuckle!

That chuckle betrayed him!

He had reached the door, with the keys in his hand and the money hidden in his clothing, when he was brought to a stop by the sudden command, in the well-known tone of Fearless Sam:

"Halt!"

Sam was sitting on the side of his berth, with his revolver pointing straight at the head of Luke.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WHEEL OF DEATH.

FOR a moment the negro did not know what to do. Then his wits came back, and he decided upon a plan of action as promptly as the detective himself could have done it.

Apparently doubling himself up into a ball, Luke flew at the detective, and knocked the pistol from his hand. Then before Sam could recover himself, he had reached the corridor, after slamming the door behind him, and sped like the wind down the corridor and the stairs, and reached the cage in which Leonard Merville was walking impatiently up and down.

With trembling fingers, the negro thrust the brass key into the padlock and in a moment had the iron door open and Leonard was free.

"What's the matter?" asked the young man, coldly. "What are you so excited about?"

"Fo' de Lawd, Mas'r Leonard, he's coming!"

"Who is coming?"

"Him—Fea'less Sam. We must run."

At this moment Leonard's sharp ears detected the sound of Wilson's footsteps on the foot of the stairs at the other end of the deck.

He hastily opened the lantern and blew out the light, and then, taking Luke by the hand, led him to the side of the boat.

"Curse him! What did you do to wake him up, Luke?"

"Nothing, fo' de Lawd!" stuttered the excited negro.

"I don't believe you. However, this is no time to argue about it. Come with me. He'll have the whole boat alarmed directly, I suppose, curse him!"

"Indeed, it seemed as if the opinion of Leonard Merville was to be borne out by the facts.

Hardly had the two fugitives got away from the vicinity of the cages when the detective discovered that Leonard Merville had escaped. He suspected that some move was on hand to get Merville out as soon as he saw the negro, and he had come straight down to the cages as soon as he had got the door of his state-room open and picked up his revolver from the floor.

No sooner did he see the cage door open, then, than he cried out to Canada Jack to come and help him. He was so determined that Leonard Merville should not escape him, now that he had recovered the money that he was sure was stolen from the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburgh, and had the evidence all nicely worked up, that he did not care how many people helped him to recapture his prisoner. As for Luke, he had chosen to come back into the lion's jaws, when he had a chance of getting away, and he must suffer too.

In less than two minutes, Fearless Sam had Canada Jack, the Skeleton and Handel Montgomery all helping him to trail the two men, and he might have had everybody else on board, only that he thought it advisable for most of them to watch different parts of the boat where the fugitives might have run to, rather than to keep with him in hunting in the direction in which he knew they had gone.

Meanwhile, Merville and Luke were hard pressed.

Leonard had been staying on the boat more in a spirit of bravado than anything else, since he had known that Belle Howard would not have anything to do with him, and since his biding-place, near Arkansas City, where the voodoo woman had so worked upon the feelings of Luke, had been discovered by the detective. He would

like to get even with Dale Graham, and he had sworn to kill Fearless Sam Wilson. But he did not mean to risk his liberty even for revenge. He could get that some other time.

He was a desperate man now, and determined that he would not be taken alive.

He was crouching by the side of the Parole, just abaft the wheel-box, so that as he looked down to the water he could just distinguish the wide, slimy paddles of the wheel rising above the surface, and running up, like steps of a ladder, into the wheel-box.

"Luke!"

"Yes, Mas'r Leonard."

"How did you get aboard—in a skiff?"

"No, Mas'r Leonard. I done swum it," answered the negro, with a grin.

"Um! That's what I supposed. Well, it makes no difference. It would not be safe for us to row away now. They would be after us like bloodhounds. Our only chance is to hide somewhere aboard the boat until we get a chance to escape."

The young man was talking more to himself than to his companion, but Luke answered him:

"Dey's comin' mighty close, Mas'r Leonard."

"Let them come. I have a pistol. Have you anything?"

"Deed I has. Look at my knife. It's a daisy," answered Luke, feeling the edge of his blade lovingly on his nail. "I like just to put this into dat Canada Jack first, and den into Fea'less Sam. Wish I'd done that when I was in de cabin."

"I wish you had. However, it is no use talking about it now. It is going to be a close shave."

"Hyar dey is," burst in the negro, in an excited whisper. "Whar will we go?"

"Follow me!" was Merville's hasty command.

He had buttoned his coat closely around him, so as not to impede his movements, and he now leaped over the guard-rail, like the trained athlete that he was.

"Fo' de Lawd, Mas'r Leonard, whar you gwine?" asked Luke, in horror. "You drown, shuah, if you git in de track ob de paddle-wheels."

"You ass! Don't you see that the wheels are not moving? Follow me, and don't talk."

He let himself down gently into the water, and then grasping one of the slippery paddles, pulled himself up until he was hidden completely from the view of any one on deck by the wheel-box.

"Golly! He t'ink ob t'ings dat would neber 'cur to me," muttered Luke, in a spasm of admiration of his master.

He followed the example of Leonard without hesitation, for he could hear the voices of Sam and the Skeleton Dude very near, and there was no time to waste if he meant to avoid being made a prisoner, and perhaps being consigned to a State Prison for a long term of years. He knew he need expect no mercy now.

Luke was not so agile as the acrobat, but he was quite as strong, if not stronger, and he climbed up to a perch just below his master with a nimbleness that won for him a grunt of praise from Leonard, as he sat on his slippery seat.

"I could almost hev sworn they wore hyar a moment ago," they heard Sam say, a minute later, just over their heads.

"Perhaps they have jumped overboard," suggested the Skeleton.

"What a blooming silly notion," put in Handel Montgomery, who, pleased as he was over recovering his money, could not resist the temptation to pick on the Skeleton at every opportunity.

"Fearless, I wish you would not let red-whiskered men interfere with things they don't understand," said the Skeleton. "They are very annoying to men of sense."

"You—you—animated toothpick," spluttered Montgomery. "Go and hide yourself in a gas-pipe, will you?"

"I'll hide you both in a sack and throw you overboard if you do not keep quiet," growled Canada Jack.

Canada Jack soon had reason to be sorry that he had spoken, for both the Skeleton and Handel turned on him for his interference with a round of abuse that made him wince.

"When I'm discussing anything with a gentleman, even if he is a Skeleton, I don't want any blooming grafter or short-card man to put his oar in," observed Handel, with much dignity.

"And when I have a few remarks to make to a gentleman with red whiskers who plays the English concertina, I can settle my difficulty with him myself," added the Skeleton.

"You are an impudent fellow," observed the Englishman.

"And a know-nothing," said the Skeleton.

"Not fit to associate with professional people," declared Handel.

"Shut up!" commanded the detective, "or I'll throw all three of you overboard. Canada, you ought to know enough to let these two idiots alone. I am ashamed of you."

"I am ashamed of myself," said Canada Jack, contritely, "but they make me so mad sometimes that I can't keep still."

"Canada!" said the detective, in a reflective

tone, as if he had not been paying any attention to the last remark of his companion.

"Yes."

"Those fellows went over ther side of ther boat just hyar. I can see ther wet mark of Luke's clothes. When he came into my cabin I noticed that he was all wet, as of course he would be, unless he hed hed a chance ter get er new suit of clothes somewhar, which is not likely at this time in ther morning."

"You have a great head, Fearless," observed Canada Jack, admiringly.

The detective took off his hat and used the silk handkerchief to polish the great head, without replying in words to Canada Jack's encomium.

"Where do you think they went then? Swam away?"

"I s'pose so. I'm thinking whether it would not be well to get the skiffs out and go after them."

"I don't think so, Fearless. We shall have a better chance if we wait till daylight, and then make a hunt for them on shore. They can't get far in two or three hours."

"Thar's sense in what you say, Canada. We'll take another good look about that boat in ther meantime, in case they might hev crawled aboard again, after climbing over ther side ter throw us off ther scent. D'yer see?"

As he thus spoke, the detective moved away, followed by his three companions, and Luke and Leonard Merville, in their wet, uncomfortable hiding-place on the great paddle-wheel, breathed freer.

"How soon will it be safe for us to get out ob hyar, Mas'r Leonard?" asked Luke, when he had been sitting quietly for perhaps ten minutes after the departure of the detective and his two companions.

"Not for some time yet. Fearless and those other fellows are on the watch, I guess. In the course of an hour, if we don't hear anything we can swim around to one of those skiffs, muffle the oars and row a long way down the river, so as to fool them. They think we are ashore near here."

"Good idea, Mas'r Leonard!"

Leonard was about to reply, when something happened that made his hair stand on end and the cold perspiration run down his forehead, in spite of his wet and uncomfortable situation.

Luke noticed it, at the same moment, and although his woolly hair did not straighten out, he felt a creepy, crawly sensation all over him that seemed to freeze his blood.

The wheel was trembling preparatory to turning!

For an instant the two men were paralyzed with horror!

Then the negro, who was below, began to climb rapidly down toward the water, Leonard following him.

Too late!

The wheels began to revolve, and they could not get from one to the other of the paddles, although they were moving slowly, as quickly as the paddles went up.

For an instant or so, the two men managed to hold their own, and save themselves from being drawn clear over. Then, the wheel gave a sort of flurry as if increasing its speed, and Leonard went over with the wheel and was dashed into the water on the other side, just as the negro, too, was caught by the paddle he was on, and was dragged over after his companion!

CHAPTER XXX.

LUKE AND LON.

THE action of the wheel was so sudden, that, before the two men knew they had been caught, they found themselves hurled against the rough bottom of the boat, under water, gasping and choking.

Both were good swimmers, and after the first involuntary opening of their mouths, as they were twisted so unceremoniously into a position from which it seemed impossible that they could escape, they struck out in the hope of getting above water again.

The great vessel glided along, and the splinters on the rough boards at the bottom tore holes in the clothes of the two men, and scratched their hands and faces in a terrible manner.

They did not feel their hurts, however. The strong excitement prevented their being aware of ordinary injuries, and they only bent all their energies toward getting out, without thinking whether they were hurt or not.

Of course neither could see the other. The time that they were under the boat was one of black, awful terror, during which they could hardly think, and were guided almost entirely by the animal instinct that is as strong in man as in any of the lower creatures.

Leonard Merville was the first to reach the surface of the water. He partly swam and partly pushed himself along by the flat keel of the Parole. He did not know which way he was going, or whether he was going further under, instead of moving toward the edge. The only guide he had was the grain of the wood, that, splintered and rough as it was, could be easily traced. He knew that the long

way of the wood was the long way of the boat, so he worked himself across.

It seemed to him as if he would never be clear of the monster calmly gliding over his head. The slight forward motion of the boat threw him diagonally across, which made his journey longer than it would otherwise have been.

This may have been a good thing for him in one respect, since it sent him clear of the wheel when he got away at last.

The noise made by the boat passing over him ceased as he dived mechanically to avoid an obstruction that threatened his head. Then he swam upward, and the next instant he found himself above the surface, breathing with the long inspirations that a man naturally takes after a narrow escape from suffocation.

"Where's that nigger, I wonder?" was his first audible remark, as he tried to pierce the gloom that yet hung over the water.

"Hyar I is, boss!"

The accents were weak, but were those of Luke, unmistakably.

"Where are you, Luke?"

"Hyar."

A hand was laid on his shoulder as he half turned, and he found the negro swimming by his side.

"Hurt, Luke?"

"You bet I is. I done b'lieve I've had my scalp lifted cl'ar off me," was the response.

Merville had recovered his devil-may-care spirits, and he laughed as carelessly as if he had been sitting comfortably in an arm-chair in a parlor, instead of being in the river, cold, bruised and bleeding, and with enemies on all sides of him.

"Your scalp is all right, Luke. I can see your wool. And, as for your head, it is too hard to be broken by such an adventure as this. You are all right."

"Glad to hear you say so, Mas'r Leonard. I thought I was a gone coon, shuah."

"Hush! They're looking for us."

"Who?"

"Quiet, I tell you. The old boat has almost stopped. But they are keeping her moving just a little. I am almost exhausted. We must hang to her for awhile, till we get rested a little."

As he spoke, Merville made a dash for the stern of the Parole, where he noticed a cable hanging over the taffrail. The exertion was too much for him. Something seemed to shoot through his heart like a knife, and, even as he spoke, he threw up his arms and sunk.

Like a flash Luke sprung after him, lifting himself half-way out of the water, and then dived like a duck. He caught Merville by the hair before he had time to go down very far, and the next instant he was clinging to the rope, holding the insensible form of the other in his arms.

"Golly! He's all over blood! He must have done got himself hammered against the seat. What will I do now?"

The strain upon his arms was terrible, for he was being towed along at arm's length, holding his companion above the surface in a cramped, awkward position, that took all the strength the negro possessed to keep him safely above water.

He could hear the voices of the detective and Handel Montgomery in the boat, and he was sure that if he showed his head above the taffrail they would see him.

"Can't help it!" he muttered. "I done got ter do someting. Can't let dis hyar boy die in my arms, nohow, an' he will die, shuab, ef I don't get him on board."

Luke put forth a Herculean effort, and managed to drag himself close to the boat, and then, throwing the inanimate form of Leonard Merville over his shoulder, climbed up the rope hand over hand till he could clutch the railing.

So far he was safe. The baggage was piled up at the stern of the boat, and he could crawl on deck without immediate danger of being caught.

To lay Leonard on the deck, wipe the blood from his face, and make an examination of his limbs, to satisfy himself that they were not broken, was for Luke the work of a very few minutes. Then he looked about him anxiously, to find something to revive the young man.

"He's just done fainted. That's what. I must have some liquor for him, somehow. I'll just go to the kitchen, and if I don't scare that durned nigger cook inter giving me something, I don't know my own name," muttered Luke.

He found some loose canvas among the baggage, and he threw it over Leonard, in the hope of preventing him from taking cold, for it must be remembered that both were soaked with river water, and that the air of the early morning was sharp, even on the lower Mississippi.

"Now for the cook!"

Looking cautiously about him, Luke went forward carefully but swiftly.

The cook's galley, which communicated with the kitchen, was on the lower deck, a dumb-waiter leading from the kitchen to the dining-room on the main deck above. There was a rear entrance to the galley, so that it was possible for Luke to obtain access to it without going into the kitchen at all. This was his purpose.

The door was secured with a spring lock in-

side, and he knew it was the habit of the cook to keep the door fastened, so as to keep out the deck hands and others who might try to help themselves to delicacies from the galley without permission of the cook or steward.

"Golly! If he don't open that door I'll have to go around to the kitchen. Then I'll meet all them high-toned stewards and waiters, and have a lot of trouble," grumbled Luke to himself, as he tried the door of the galley and found it fast.

For a moment he stopped, in deep thought. He was nonplussed. The thought of Leonard, lying helpless and unconscious on deck seemed to stimulate his brain, however, and he knocked gently at the door, while a knowing smile crept over his mahogany features.

There was no response to his knock, and he repeated it.

"Wal, what yer want?" demanded a voice from within that one could have sworn was that of a Louisiana negro no matter where it was heard.

"Lon!" whispered Luke, in as soft a tone as he could use.

"Hiyi!" responded Lorenzo, the cook, in a sort of ecstasy. "Is that you, Chloe?"

"Deed it is," whispered Luke, in a soft falsetto, while a broad grin overspread his features as he thought of the surprise he would afford his friend Lon in another minute.

"What yo' want, Chloe?" asked Lon.

"Want yo', of course," replied Luke. "What should I want? Lemme talk to yo'."

"Say, Chloe," whispered Lorenzo, with his face close to the door. "Thar's the steward toting himself roun' hyar. Wait till he goes out. Den I open the doo'."

"Ef yo' don't open it now you needn't do it at all. I guess Sam Jackson wouldn't keep me waitin' ef I wanted to speak to him," answered Luke, in a tone of annoyance.

Poor Lon was in a quandary. The steward was bustling about the kitchen, and the door between the kitchen and the galley was partly open, so that it would be impossible for any one to visit the cook without being seen by his superior. The orders were very strict against opening the door of the galley, and Lon knew that the steward, who was an elderly negro, with an exalted idea of his own importance, would visit his wrath upon him without hesitation if orders were disobeyed. On the other hand, here was Chloe, one of the chambermaids, upon whom he had been sweet since the beginning of the voyage, and who he flattered himself, he had taken away from that hateful Sam Jackson, a deck-hand, who had been trying to win the smiles of the dusky Chloe since he had first gazed upon her.

"Are yo' gwine to open this hyar doo'?" demanded Luke, who felt strongly inclined to kick it in, in his desperation, as he thought of Leonard Merville's plight.

Lon hesitated no longer. He undid the latch, and at the same instant, he found a pair of sinewy arms thrown around him, while a hard head was butted into his mouth with such force as to stifle the cry that was about to proceed from it.

The half-open door between the galley and kitchen allowed Luke to see the dignified steward—a large man, with snow-white hair falling in a crinkly mass to his shoulders—moving about among his plates and table-linen, and occasionally stepping near the door, as if half-inclined to come into the galley.

Luke knew that he must act quickly, if he meant to get away without discovery.

"Whar's yer rum?" he demanded of the trembling Lon, as he still held him in a fierce embrace.

"I don't—don't—"

"Tell me yer don't know, an' I'm gwine ter kill yer," interrupted Luke, drawing his long knife, and flourishing it in the eyes of Lon.

The knife was wet from being in the river, but as Luke had been cut and bruised from his tumbling about in the bottom of the boat, some of his blood had got upon the knife, and mingled with the water. To the terrified Lorenzo it appeared to be all blood.

"It's—it's—in ther kitchen," gasped Lon.

Luke knew, from his manner and appearance, that he was speaking the truth, and he felt that he was not out of his difficulty yet.

"Look hyar," he said, after a moment's pause, as he moved the point of his long knife up and down before Lon's staring eyes. "Yo' go inter ther kitchen and bring me a bottle of rum, and bring it right away. An' ef I see yer make any movement ter speak ter ther steward, I'll carve yer inter mincemeat. See?"

Then he released the other, and, knife in hand, watched him slip through the narrow space left by the partly-open door, and walk over to a closet on the other side of the kitchen.

The dignified steward glanced carelessly at the cook, and asked him, casually, what he wanted.

Lon saw Luke standing in the galley with his knife in his hand, and he stammered:

"I jist done want some maple syrup. Dat's all."

"Thar's some in ther closet, over dar," said

the steward, and took no more notice of the cook.

With trembling fingers, Lon selected a bottle that he knew contained rum from a number packed away snugly on the shelves of the closet, and lost no time in getting back to Luke.

"Come with me," commanded Luke, briefly.

Without a word, Lon obeyed. He followed his companion to the end of the deck, and then started back in horror as his gaze fell upon the bloodstained form of Leonard Merville, lying at full length, his heavy eyelids slightly raised, as the young man slowly returned to consciousness.

"Fo' de Lawd! Wha's that?" gasped Lon.

"It's Mas'r Leonard. That's who it is. Who did yer think it was?" demanded Luke, as he poured a little of the rum into the mouth of the young man, and smiled to see that it was reviving him.

"Deed, I thought it was the debbil!"

Hardly were the words out of the unfortunate Lorenzo's mouth, when Luke gave him a resounding slap on the side of the cheek that sent him reeling leeward.

"Yo' low down nigger!" growled Luke. "Yo' talk to a gemman like dat! Say Mas'r Leonard look like de debbil! Fo' do Lawd, it's a wonder I didn't kill yer."

"Shut up, Luke!" interposed Merville. "Do you want to bring the whole boat-load of idiots upon us? Who is this fellow?"

"De cook, sah," answered Lon. "I gib Luke some rum for you, sah."

"Luke, we must get a skiff and drop astern. Then they may not see us. It is not safe to stay here any longer," said Leonard, faintly, as he managed to raise himself to his feet with the aid of the colored man who was so faithful to him, whatever faults he may have had.

"We'll have ter take this hyar nigger with us, then. We can't leave him here, or he'd put everybody on to us at once."

"As you please," returned the young man, wearily, as he put the bottle to his lips again. "Only let us get off this unlucky boat."

"Yes, Mas'r Leonard."

Luke sneaked quietly toward the taffrail on the side where he had noticed a skiff towing, and was already throwing some canvas into it for a covering for Leonard, when he was startled by a cry from the young man, and saw him dart forward in the very direction of the spot where he knew the detective, Canada Jack and the rest of those he feared so much were standing.

"Golly! He's gone cl'ar crazy, shuah!" muttered Luke, as he went after the young man.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ESCAPE CUT OFF.

LORENZO saw Leonard and Luke disappear behind a pile of trunks and other baggage, and then made tracks for his galley with all speed. He found the steward there, examining some eggs that Lon had had upon the fire at the moment he had been interrupted by Luke, and that were now, it is unnecessary to say, as hard as base-balls.

The steward was a dignified gentleman, as has been intimated already, and Lon felt as if he would have been pleased to sink through the floor into the river itself, to escape the reproachful, questioning gaze of his superior.

For at least a minute after Lon had returned to the galley not a word was spoken. The steward stood with the handle of the saucepan in which the unlucky eggs lay in the bubbling, boiling water, clasped in his hand, and his gaze seemed to Lon as if it would pierce him through and through.

At last he spoke.

"Lorenzo, wha' kind of cooki' do yer call dis hyar? How long do yo' think eggs should done b'lie?"

Lon did not answer. His offense was so rank that he could not find words to excuse it. So he held his peace, and looked at the steward with an expression like that of a dog caught in the act of stealing, and who expects a thrashing from his master.

Then the grave and dignified steward took the four eggs out of the saucepan, one by one, with a spoon, and hurled them with all his force at the galley door, where they made a noise like a base-ball hitting a back-stop. Having accomplished this feat, all the time hardly removing his gaze from Lon's wretched face, he turned on his heel and marched into the kitchen, closing the door behind him with a most emphatic bang.

"Golly! De ole man is mad, shuah! 'Deed, I thought I was a dead nigger when he looked at me the fu'st time. Now, what shall I do? Dey is all looking for dat 'ar Mas'r Leonard, an' ef I don't tell 'em whar he is maybe I'll be a 'cessory after de fac'. Oh, Lawd! Wha' shall I do?"

In his agony of uncertainty and apprehension, Lon had uttered this last sentence aloud, although he was utterly unawre of the fact. It was with a tremendous start, therefore, that he heard a voice replying to what he believed was his mental question:

"Do? Why, cook me some eggs and give me some coffee. I am nearly dead with hun-

ger. I believe I shall be getting thin if I don't take better care of myself."

Lon laughed a horse laugh, for he recognized the piping accents of the Skeleton Dude, and the idea of his losing any more flesh struck the negro as being a remarkably funny conceit.

"What do you mean by laughing when I speak to you, you ill-conditioned Fifteenth Amendment," said the Dude. "There is nothing laughable in my appearance, is there?"

"No, sah—no, sah," returned the negro, hastily, for he did not feel inclined to wantonly offend any one else now if he could avoid it. He had had all the strife he wanted for one day.

"Then cook me the ham and eggs, and do it carefully, or I'll grind you to powder with one blow of my fist."

"Where will you have your meal, sah?"

"Oh, in the kitchen. I am not particular."

I suppose I can go in there?"

"You can if the boss will let you."

"Who do you call the boss?"

"The steward, sah."

"The steward, indeed! I should like to see him interfere with me—a professional," observed the Skeleton Dude, with dignity, as he opened the door of the kitchen, and seated himself at a table, with a haughty glance in the direction of the old steward.

Lon did not hear any disturbance, so he supposed that Tim Koffey and the steward had arranged matters to their mutual satisfaction, and he went on cooking the ham and eggs with the philosophical reflection that if they killed each other they could not agitate him much more now that he had seen so many peculiar occurrences on this boat.

He was worrying himself as to whether he ought to tell some one that he had seen Leonard Merville and Luke under such suspicious circumstances, but he was in too much fear for his personal safety to do anything, and by the time he had the ham and eggs ready to serve to the Skeleton Dude he had made up his mind that it would be better for him not to say a word to anybody.

He took the ham out of the skillet and arranged it neatly on a warm plate. Then he placed the eggs, fried on one side, on the ham, and licked his lips as the appetizing odor of the dish crept about his nostrils.

"Golly! Dat's almost too good for that Skeleton Dude!" he observed, aloud, as he looked lovingly at the dish.

"You are right," broke in another voice, that he recognized as that of Handel Montgomery. "And I beg to inform you that no blooming Skeleton is going to eat it."

"Sah?" exclaimed Lon, starting back with his egg-slice still in his hand.

"You heard what I said. I'm the cove as is going to slash himself across the chest with that 'am and eggs, so give the blooming stuff here. Quick!"

The concertina-player pushed the cook to one side, and, seizing a knife and fork, attacked the savory meat and eggs with the voracity of a man who had not eaten anything for some hours, and who could not hold out any longer. The dish was on a small shelf or stand near the stove, too high for him to sit at it, but he did not care for that. He was content to stand so long as he got the meal, and as he mumbled, with his mouth full, he would have stood on his head to enjoy such a meal.

"Where's the bread?" he demanded.

"In the kitchen," answered the trembling Lorenzo.

"Go and fetch it."

"Sah?"

"You heard what I said. Go and fetch it. A gentleman cannot eat 'am and eggs without bread."

Lon looked imploringly at him for a moment, for he knew that as soon as he opened the door he would be confronted by the Skeleton Dude as well as the steward, and after that he did not know what would happen to him. But there was no sign of relenting in the face of the concertina-player, who was still making terrible ravages in the ham and eggs, and he opened the door with a groan of despair.

No sooner did Lon show his face in the kitchen than Tim Koffey flew at him, and seizing him by the shoulder, demanded to know what he had done with the ham and eggs.

"He done eat them, sah!" gasped Lon.

"Who?" thundered Tim, if he could be said to thunder with the voice nature had given him.

"He, sah!"

Some occult intelligence flashed through the brain of the Skeleton Dude, and he divined the truth.

With one leap he had dashed through the door into the cook-house and thrown himself bodily upon the concertina-player, just as that voracious gentleman was carrying a piece of ham to his mouth. The Dude grasped the fork, and, with a howl of rage, conveyed the tempting morsel to his mouth.

"You rascal! You unprofessional pig!" he spluttered. "To dare to come here and take my breakfast from my very mouth. Who do you think you are, with your concertina-playing nonsense, that only queers the show? I'll have

you discharged! No, I won't. I'll have you kept on, in the curio hall, among the freaks, as the man with the iron nerve. That's what I'll do!"

Out of breath with his objurgations, the Dude took some more of the ham, and, as the concertina-player looked at him, too surprised to say a word, he cleared off every scrap from the plate, and then ate all the bread in sight.

Just as he accomplished this feat the concertina-player recovered his powers of motion. He snatched the plate away from the Dude, and deliberately broke it over his head. Then, he seized the nose of the Dude, and was about to give it a good pull, when Tim, who did not lack courage, doubled his fist, and hit the Englishman a tremendous blow in the face.

This was the signal for a rough-and-tumble, hammer-and-tongs fight, and the two men went for each other like demons. It could not last long. The Skeleton Dude was weaker than his opponent, and he soon found himself lying in a heap with Montgomery standing over him, shaking his fist.

What more might have taken place can only be conjectured, for at this moment a noise of curses and kicking could be heard outside the door, and Lon opened it wide.

One glance showed him that another contest was in full force outside. Leonard Merville, with the blood still on his face, was locked in the embrace of Fearless Sam, who was trying to slip a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

"I told you I would come back to you and settle you, and I will do it now!" cried Merville. "I did not mean to do it quite so soon, but the sight of you was too much for me."

The detective did not reply, but there was a frown of fierce determination on his brow different from his usual quiet expression.

The two men tugged and strained, and it was evidently a struggle to the death, when the sound of hurrying footsteps resounded along the main deck above.

Luke, who had been trying to help Leonard, but who could not do so because the combatants changed positions so often, darted into the fray, and seizing Merville with an iron grip, dragged him away bodily.

"Run, Mas'r Leonard, run!" he whispered. "We'll fix him another time—but not now!"

Leonard Merville was a quick-witted young man, and he saw that the advice of Luke was sound. So he scuttled along the deck, to the stern, to look for the skiff.

It was gone!

The detective, Tom Elliott, Handel Montgomery, Tim Koffey, and Lon were all close behind them.

Without hesitation Leonard Merville jumped overboard, with Luke by his side.

The dark waters closed over them, and those who were watching them never saw them rise.

"That's the last of them!" said the detective, solemnly.

"Ease her! Back her!" cried the captain to his engineer, and the great boat went slowly back up the river.

"What's that for?" asked the detective.

"So that we won't drift away from them too fast, if they are here, don't you see?" said Old Tom, answering the question himself. "The boat will remain just about in the same spot, if the engine is kept slowly backing, and if they are anywhere about we ought to see them."

"My opinion is that we shall never see them again," returned Sam.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LIVING OR DEAD.

WEAK as he was, Leonard Merville knew that he must make a struggle if he was to escape from his predicament the second time with even his life. He dived deep as he struck the water, and then, as he felt a slimy something touch him, tried to rise.

A thrill of deadly horror passed through him. *He was in the clutches of a many armed monster that held him, helpless, in the soft mud of the river-bed!*

Through his bursting brain ran wild visions of a devil-fish, such as Poe has described in one of the most terrible of his stories. Could such a creature be holding him prisoner now? The thought was frenzy!

Leonard Merville was no coward, whatever faults he might possess.

After the first awful moment he set himself to get away. Fortunately for him, he was a strong-lunged fellow, in the full glow of health, although weakened by his experiences of that morning. He could hold his breath longer than any of his acquaintances, and when a boy had often amused himself by staying under water an unconsciously long time, when swimming with his playmates, for the benevolent purpose of frightening the wits out of them.

Therefore, he was able to bear the pressure of the water upon his head, and the absence of air to his lungs, much better than most men.

His wits, that had been somewhat scattered by the suddenness of his plunge into the river, and the twisting around him of the long, slimy arms of his unknown enemy, returned with vigor in proportion to his peril.

He laughed inwardly at his own idea that he was in the grasp of a devil-fish, and wondered at his own foolishness when he recognized his foe as nothing more or less than the roots of a gigantic tree that had been beaten down from the bank at some previous time and cast into the river, to annoy pilots and threaten with destruction many a good craft. The current drew the waving roots down-stream, and they kept up a constant motion, so that it would be excusable in a person with no previous knowledge of "snags," as they are called, to mistake them for some hideous subterranean creature.

Still, the fact that it was a snag, and not a devil-fish, that held him, did not relieve him from apprehension. He had heard of many a death caused by these treacherous roots, that became knotted around the body of some luckless roustabout, who had fallen overboard, and been caught before he knew what had befallen him. He knew that men had struggled with their foe for a few minutes, until consciousness had departed, and how their decomposing bodies had come to the surface weeks and months afterward, when the action of the water had released them, and cast them to the surface, with all semblance of their former selves departed.

The thought was madness to Leonard, and he made a herculean effort to free himself. At first all his efforts were in vain. As he cast off one root, another would twist itself around him with relentless persistency, and ere he had got rid of that one, still another would catch him.

The roots were long and flexible, and in their determination to hold him down and drown him, seemed to have the cunning and intelligence of a human being lost to all sense of mercy. They never ceased their oscillating, and it seemed to Leonard as if he could hear them laughing, in low, chuckling tones, over his desperate plight.

For nearly a minute he had been fighting against what seemed to be his fate, and still he was in almost as tight a grasp as ever. His head was nearly bursting, and he could feel his heart beating with a force that seemed to bring it up into his very throat.

At last he managed to get his right arm free, and a thrill of delight went through him as he got his hand to his pocket and drew forth a large jack-knife. It was with considerable difficulty that he managed to open the blade with his teeth, and he accomplished the feat only with the unfortunate accompaniment of getting his mouth full of ruddy water.

A person who has never tried to get water out of his mouth while his head was covered can have but a faint idea of the impossibility of doing so. There was only one thing to be done, and that was to swallow it, nasty as it was.

All this was accomplished in much less time than it takes to tell it. Even while Leonard was swallowing the nauseous draught he was slashing at the roots with his keen knife, and then, pushing hard at the bottom of the river, he went up with a rush.

How he enjoyed his first full draught of free air! Padding gently, to keep himself afloat, he looked around him to see where he was.

Hardly had he had time to do so before he saw a shadow almost above his head, and then he dived just in time to avoid being struck by the keel of the Parole that was coming along slowly, but surely.

Under the boat, he felt the rough wood of the keel, and then, with a great effort, he shot himself out, and was again in free water, with a chance to breathe.

"Mas'r Leonard!" The voice was close to him, and almost before he realized that Luke was by his side, the negro had patted him on the shoulder in an ecstasy of delight at seeing him alive.

"Luke!" "Yes, Mas'r Leonard. It's Luke. Whar hab you been?"

"Down below, examining the bed of the Mississippi," returned Leonard, with grim humor. "It's damp down there, and there are rather more snags than I care for, but it is interesting nevertheless."

The two men were swimming side by side under the port bow of the Parole, getting their breath preparatory to doing whatever seemed wise under the circumstances.

It was broad daylight now, and the shore line, nearly half a mile away, was becoming more and more distinct, as the haze of the morning lifted by degrees. To swim for the shore was obviously the only thing left for them, unless they gave themselves into the power of the detective on the boat, which was not to be thought of now.

"Come, Luke. We must make a dash for the shore."

"All right, Mas'r Leonard. And then, what?"

"Then, Luke, we will see!" returned Leonard Merville, with a grinding of his white teeth. "I have not done with Sam Wilson yet, as he will find. Curse him!"

"They will see us from the boat, I'm 'fraid, Mas'r Leonard," observed Luke, quietly. "A shot will travel mighty fast—faster than we can swim."

"Dive!" said Leonard, sententiously.

He turned from the boat as he spoke, and struck out vigorously for the shore. He seemed

to be stronger in the water than out of it, and he felt scarcely any effect from his adventures that had resulted in his being so bruised and battered. Notwithstanding the weight of his clothes, he felt as if he could swim all day if necessary. As for Luke, he swam like a duck, never noticing that it required exertion, but moving his arms and legs mechanically.

Hardly had Leonard Merville taken a stroke, however, when he found himself once more in the power of an enemy that was as relentless as any with which he had had to deal.

It dealt him a buffet on the back of his head that partly stunned him, and dashed him a long way under water. He swam involuntarily, and came to the surface almost immediately.

Then it was that he realized where he was.

Another blow on the right arm that rendered it almost powerless, and he found himself whirled out of the water in a network of wood and iron, with green slime entering his mouth and eyes, and rendering him blind and giddy. *He was in the paddle-wheel, for the second time!*

His only hope was to cling to the wheel, he knew, and he did cling with the tenacity of desperation.

Hardly had he been dragged up into the interior of the wheel-box, with great beams threatening him on every side, when he was dashed into the water again, but still hanging to the blade of the wheel, because afraid to let go.

Here he sunk into the water he had a hasty glimpse of the face of Luke, above him, and wearing an expression of terror foreign to the countenance of his generally careless follower. Luke was horror-stricken now, and he showed it in every lineament.

Battered, tossed and bleeding, he was hardly into the water before he was out, and continuing his wild ride on the paddles. He saw Luke being plunged into the water as he himself was lifted out, and then both were out together.

If the engine would only slacken!

It was not running very fast, but to the two men on the outer edge it seemed to be traveling with lightning speed. In and out they were dashed, and still they maintained their positions on the paddles, just out of the reach of the beams that threatened to brain them at every revolution.

"Mas'r Leonard!" shrieked Luke, when they had been around four or five times.

Before Leonard could answer the negro had disappeared beneath the water, and the young man had followed him. They arose again and Luke shouted:

"Let us yell together!"

"All right. The next time!" answered Leonard, and then they were engulfed. As they rose they united in a wild shriek of despair, that, however, was quite inaudible to those on the deck of the Parole, through the clanking of the machinery and the angry swish of the water by the immense paddles. The walking-beam kept up its steady up and down movement, and the two poor wretches clinging to the wheel were as far from any help from the people on the boat as if they had been a hundred feet beneath the bed of the Mississippi.

They were dashed into the water, and again as they arose they shouted:

"Help! Help! For the love of heaven! Help!"

They might have spared their breath. The swishing waters seemed to mock them as the paddles dashed them under water again, and drew them up in the hideous whirl that seemed as if it would keep on forever. A grinding demon, that knew no pity!

"Mas'r Leonard!" gasped Luke, as he disappeared beneath the water.

Up again, and then Leonard saw with dismay, that the iron frame of the negro was relaxing, and that he evidently could not hold out much longer.

"Don't give up, Luke," he cried, as loudly as he could, although conscious that his voice was getting weaker, and that either succor or death must come soon. "Stick to—"

Down into the muddy waters, and then, as he came up he looked at Luke more anxiously than might have been expected of so selfish an individual as Leonard Merville.

Luke was unconscious. He was so twisted in among the beams and supports of the wheel that he could not fall off very well, but he was no longer holding by his hands.

"Poor devil!" muttered Leonard, as he went down again. "I shall be the same way in another moment unless I can find some way of getting out of this."

He made a desperate resolve. The next time he went under he would cast himself loose, and take his chance of getting clear of the wheel before it could strike him and drag him up into the machinery again. It was a slight hope, but he felt that he could not afford to let it go.

He was down, and up before he could put his plan into execution this time, and he saw that Luke's unconscious form was still staying in its position where it would not be in any more danger than it had been.

Down went Leonard again, and this time he tried to disengage itself. But he found that he had not taken into sufficient consideration the

buoyancy of the water. Had he been in the air he might have jumped off the wheel long ago, with no more peril than of a hard bruise, or perhaps a broken limb. But under water it was different. He was kept floating against the wheel, and could not get away. The water kept him there, in spite of all his efforts.

Leonard was so nonplused by this unexpected experience that he was dashed into the water three times before he could collect his thoughts sufficiently to decide what he would do next. It seemed to him as if his last hope was gone, and he looked at the inanimate form of Luke with something like envy that his companion was no longer aware of his terrible predicament.

Leonard Merville sunk in a heap into one corner of the little nook into which he was packed, and something that was worse than despair crept into his heart. He felt like a rat in a trap, where he could not even make an attempt to rescue himself.

"This is a nice way for a man to end his life," he reflected bitterly, "and with such a debt of revenge to pay. That smooth-faced Dale Graham will have it all his own way with Belle Howard, while I—I shall be here, ground into a horrible thing that she will not be able to look at."

The thought was agony. Involuntarily he stretched himself as he pictured to himself his rival, rejoicing in the possession of Belle Howard as his affianced, while he, Leonard Merville, had been destroyed in this ignominious manner, without a chance of fighting for his life.

It happened that the wheel had just drawn him out of the water as he raised his head.

The movement was a deadly one for him. A projecting bar caught him squarely on the temple, and as he sunk back into the wheel, he was thrown off by centrifugal force until he fell upon the body of Luke. Then he was under water, and up again.

Strangely enough, the blow on Luke's body when Leonard fell against him revived the negro, and he came partly to himself. He caught hold of his companion involuntarily, but as he did so there was another fearful jar, and Leonard had again been struck upon the temple by the iron bar.

"Oh, Mas'r Leonard," cried Luke, faintly. "Mas'r Leonard! Is yo' hurt?"

All the answer he received was to be dashed into the water, and as they came up that cruel bar struck the head of the unconscious young man with a blow that seemed to go to the heart of the negro. As they sunk again Luke made a desperate effort and drew his companion a little further in toward the center of the wheel, and this time he missed the bar.

"Thank the Lawd!" groaned Luke, fervently. "Pears to me that thing is enough to kill him."

He drew the wounded head of the young men close to his breast, and as he was drawn down again, with his senses in a whirl, he actually contrived to wipe the blood from the wet face of Leonard with an old pocket-handkerchief. But the handkerchief was torn out of his hand at the next revolution of the wheel, and then, with a last despairing cry for help—a cry that could no more have been heard by those on deck than by the men working in the fields across the broad river two miles away, he, too, became unconscious again.

And still the awful wheel went round and round, carrying with it the two men whom no one could tell whether they were dead or alive.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TALE IS TOLD.

WHEN the detective and his companions moved away from the side of the boat near the paddle-wheel, they made a careful search over the boat, in the slight hope of finding that they had come on board to hide until they could manage to get away without being seen.

"No, they've gone, sure enough, but I'll get 'em in the morning, sure as my name's Sam Wilson," growled the detective.

"Well, Fearless, what's the matter now?" asked the captain, who had come down from the pilot house to see what all the movement below might mean.

"Nothing, only those two skunks hev got away."

"What skunks?"

The detective explained in a few words.

"Oh, well, that will be all right. You can easily catch them as soon as it is daylight. They can't get far away from here. I'll engage to track any one in this region in a few hours, unless they know the country a good deal better than I do, which is not likely."

"I'm pretty well-acquainted with it, too, for that matter," said the detective.

"Well, then, what are you worrying about? Better go and turn in an hour or so and wait for daylight. Durn me if I know when you circus people sleep. You seem to be around all the time."

Thus saying the captain went back to the pilot house and the detective walked over to the spot abaft the wheelhouse that seemed to have a mysterious attraction for him that he could not explain.

It was just at this moment that the wheel dragged over Merville and the negro.

"Heavens!" suddenly exclaimed the detective, with more emotion than Canada Jack had ever seen him display in all his life. "Thar they are, sure as I'm alive!"

"What?" asked the Skeleton, who happened to be nearest the side.

But, there was no need to ask. The white face of Merville appeared for an instant at the surface of the water, and then went up on the wheel out of sight.

"Tell the captain to stop the engine!" yelled the detective.

Montgomery flew up the stairs as if a tiger was at his heels. If he had known how to give the signal to stop it might have been done quicker, so there was nothing for it but to go up to the pilot-house to the captain.

The wheel made half a dozen revolutions more before there was any slackening in the speed at all. Each time the white face of Merville appeared, and before anything could be done, went around the wheel and up again.

He's entangled in the paddles," murmured the detective. "There is some blood on his face. He must have been crushed against some of the beams inside the wheel-box."

"Will the wheel ever stop?" said Canada Jack, clinching his hands in agony of excitement.

"It is stopping now," observed the detective, who had dropped his western dialect now that a moment of deep and awful interest had arrived.

As he spoke, the wheel, which had just taken the inanimate body of Leonard Merville out of sight, went much slower, and stopped just as it brought the white face once more above the surface of the water.

Carefully they drew him out of the entanglement of slippery boards and laid him on the deck.

Fearless Sam, who had had enough experience in the course of his adventurous life to be able to tell when a man was fatally hurt, pronounced upon the present case as soon as he had made a cursory, or superficial, examination.

"He has settled everything in this world," he said, solemnly, removing his broad-brimmed hat.

The morning sun was just showing itself above the horizon, and its first rays fell across the face of the inanimate form and cast a red glow on the pale features that made it hard at first to believe that the detective was correct.

"Is he dead?" asked a voice that caused everyone to move aside.

It was the voice of Belle Howard, who, somehow, had heard that there was trouble in which Merville was concerned, and had come down just in time to see his dead body lying on the deck.

"Yes. All is over!" answered the detective, as he took her arm, and led her away.

"Poor Leonard!" she murmured.

Dale Graham was at her side, and she threw herself into his arms, with her head resting on his shoulder, where she indulged in a passionate fit of weeping.

"And yet you would not have married him?" questioned Dale Graham, in a whisper, with a slight pang of jealousy for the dead that he could not repress.

"No, oh, no!" shuddered the girl. "But, is it not dreadful for a young man to waste his life and die like that?"

"Dreadful, indeed!" he said, as he led her forward. "And yet, Belle, it must have been either he or I. He would have killed me had he lived."

The girl's response to this was a convulsive clinging to her lover, and Dale seemed to see in the bright glow of the early morning sun the promise of a happier life than he had ever known, with Belle Howard always by his side.

While Belle and her lover were at the forward end of the boat, a miserable, wet, forlorn-looking object was crawling over the guard-rail at the stern.

"'Fo' de Lawd! I had a narrow escape," the forlorn-looking object was saying. "Wonder wha' become ob Mas'r Leonard. If he come to harm, then Luke don't want to live very much."

"Then I guess you had better die," broke in the voice of Canada Jack, as he seized the negro by the arm and pinned him against the back of one of the animal-cages.

"What's this?" cried the detective. "Luke, alive? Where did you come from?"

"I dunno," answered the negro, doggedly, "an' I don't car", now Mas'r Leonard he done gone. He was allers good to me, so he was."

There is little more to tell.

The money found on Luke was not all that had been taken from the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg, but some of the bills with the numbers that the detective had were found among it, and the rest was afterward found in a false bottom of Leonard Merville's trunk. Luke was allowed to turn State's evidence, and was not sent to prison, as he expected.

The full amount was refunded to the bank, and then, in searching among the effects of the dead man, a will was found, dated just before the Parole left Evansville, in which he bequeathed all his property, real and personal, to Belle Howard.

He gave as his reason, in the will, that he loved her, and would make her his wife, if he could, and if he couldn't he would like to place her above want. He stated, too, that most of the property was honestly come by. There might be a few thousand that were not. If Belle Howard had any compunction about receiving that, she could turn it over to some charitable institutions.

Much of the property was in the shape of real estate in Chicago, St. Louis, New York and New Orleans.

Who and what Leonard Merville was no one but Luke and Belle Howard knew, and they never told.

Dale Graham was married to Belle Howard in just three months from the time that the dead face of Leonard Merville was seen coming out of the water on the paddle-wheel, and they are as happy a couple as you can find in all the big city of New Orleans, where they have made their home. Luke, the negro, who, next to Leonard Merville, loved Belle Howard better than any one in the world, is their coachman, and a thoroughly trustworthy servant.

Handel Montgomery has gone back to England with his money, that was a bequest from a relative in the United States, but that, at one time, caused him to be suspected as connected with the robbery of the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg.

Tim Koffey, the Skeleton Dude, is still in the show business, and travels all over the country with circuses in the summer, and exhibiting his noble proportions, in museums, in the winter.

Canada Jack dropped dead, of heart disease, one day, while in the very act of throwing three-card monte.

Old Tom Elliott has been gathered to his fathers, after living a jolly life, and doing no particular harm to any man, which his friends consider a fair enough record.

Sam Wilson, "Fearless Sam," was paid a large sum of money for his excellent services in recovering the money for the Seventh National Bank of Pittsburg. He has had one or two other big jobs since that one, and is now one of the most trusted men in the employ of the United States Secret Service.

He has not given up the theatrical business altogether, but is at this very time the advertising manager at one of the principal theaters in Brooklyn, New York. The theatrical part of his career is his recreation. His real business is as FEARLESS SAM, THE "GRAND COMBINATION" DETECTIVE.

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